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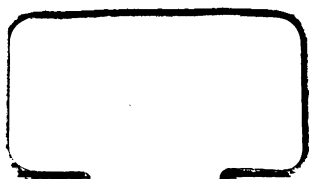
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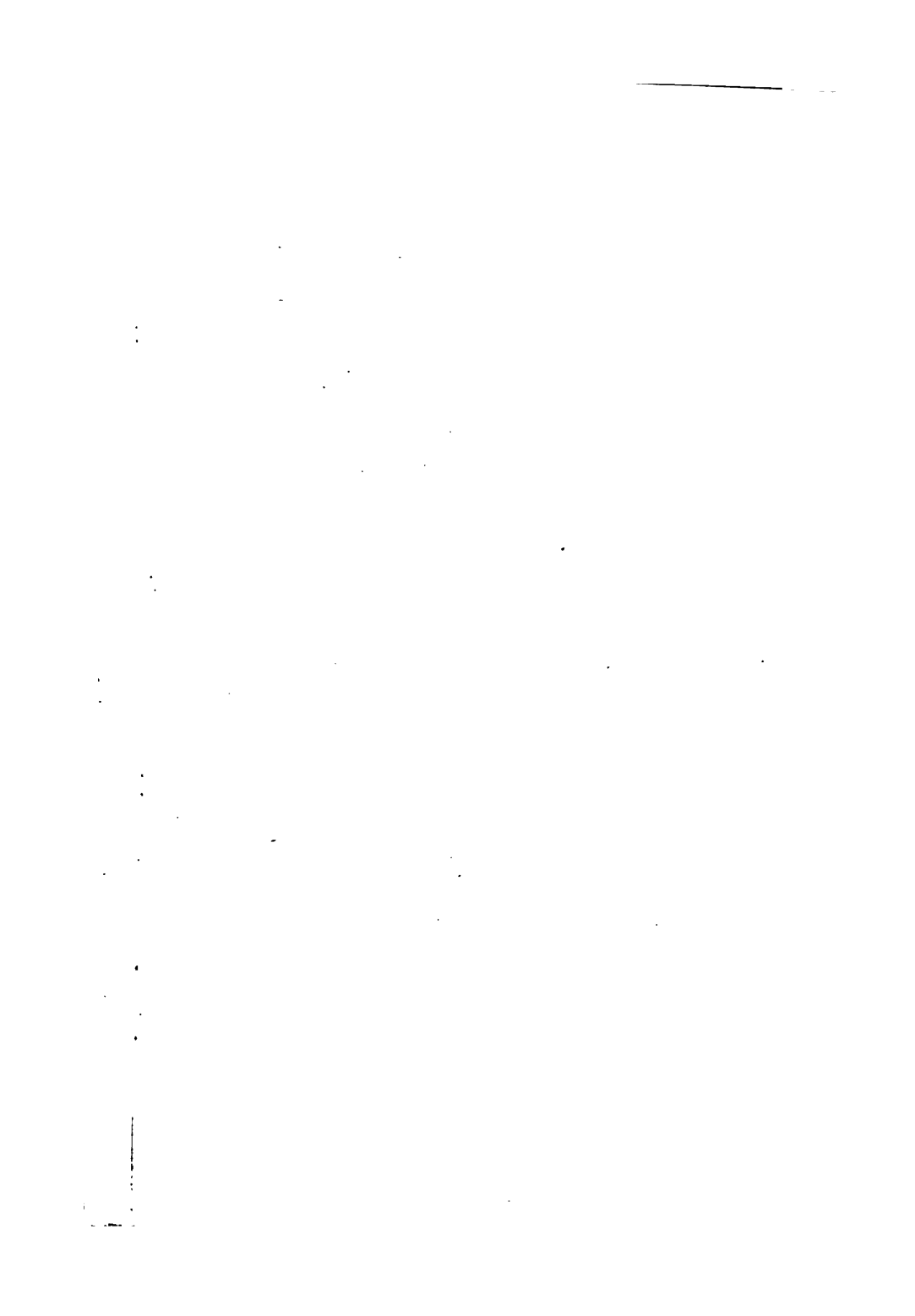


WINIFRED GRAHAM



for Edm





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THE GREAT HOUSE OF CASTLETON,
AND
PATRICIA

THE GREAT HOUSE OF CASTLETON,

AND

PATRICIA

BY

WINIFRED GRAHAM

Author of "When the Birds Begin to Sing," "Meresia," etc., etc.



London

C. ARTHUR PEARSON LIMITED

HENRIETTA STREET, W.C.

—
1898

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Affectionately Dedicated
TO
ELSIE AND EILY KEARY

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THE GREAT HOUSE OF CASTLETON

The Great House of Castleton

CHAPTER I

A CHAPTER OF INTRODUCTIONS

“ I SHALL leave London without a sigh of regret,” said Maisie.

“ I should think so ! ” retorted Dora.
“ Where’s the fun of being cooped up in a town house half the summer just because it is the season? The season does not amuse us when we are at lessons all day. I long for the country ! ”

She flicked off the head of a yellow daisy in the window-box as she spoke with a certain amount of satisfaction.

“ Look at these sooty things,” she continued
“ they don’t appreciate London, and I’ve

watered them twice a day for the last week, but they are fading already."

"No wonder, considering you emptied a whole jug of iced water over them in the heat of the sun! That is where you go wrong, Dora. You are too impetuous—you overdo things."

"Well, it is better than underdoing them," replied Dora, decidedly.

"I'll tell you what it is, we are at the awkward age—the horrid, unsatisfactory, half-and-half stage, when we are not grown up or allowed to 'come out,' yet are old enough to put away childish things. We don't care for dolls; we've soared above them. At last we are conscious that their eyes stare meaninglessly, their hair is glued at the roots, and they have no souls. Once realise that, and you're done. The fascination's gone; the illusion will never come back."

"Yes, but there are other things than dolls in the world. Wait till we get into the country. I hope father and mother will take a really jolly country house this year, with lots of animals. People often leave animals with furnished houses. What a long day they will have, and mother says house-agents are so misleading. I should be sorry to go all the way to

Warwickshire and back just to tramp over those places. By the way, it's past six now, and if we go on talking we shall never get our preparation done before supper, and then Miss Mayborne will be in a nice temper to-morrow morning."

The sisters took their books to the open window and scanned the pages earnestly. They were quick girls, and learnt with little trouble.

Miss Mayborne, the daily governess, frequently described them as "apt and intelligent."

Maisie was tall and well-proportioned. She always slept flat on her back without a pillow or bolster, and declared that she owed her good figure to this practice. She used dumb-bells every morning after a cold bath, and was as proud of her muscle as a boy might have been.

Dora was younger and smaller of build, though equally energetic, the only difference being that Dora's energy ran to brain more than to muscle. She was quick of thought, as Maisie was quick of limb. Both girls were impetuous and unaccustomed to self-restraint; they acted on impulse, but as their impulses were generally good, they were less frequently in trouble than might have been expected.

"What time will mother and father be back?" asked Dora, laying down her book.

"Oh, not till late. I shall lie awake, and when I hear them come in I'll call over the banisters, and ask if they've taken a house."

The sisters slept together, and Maisie had a talent for keeping awake.

"That's all right," said Dora ; " then I can go to sleep, and you can tell me. I am simply longing to know, but I do hate getting up when I'm drowsy."

But Dora found that warm summer evening she did not get drowsy. The air was oppressive, and the sisters lay in their two white beds, talking and tossing restlessly. At last they heard the pealing of the front door bell, and then the sound of their parents' voices in the hall. Maisie sprang up, and wriggled her tall young figure into a long, pink dressing-gown. Dora followed her example, slipping her feet into woolly shoes.

"Let's go down and hear the chat," said Dora, surprised to find herself wide awake. Maisie was already half-way down the stairs.

"Oh ! mother, what's the news ?" she cried, kissing a delicate-looking woman in a light fawn dress, that fitted her figure to perfection. She might almost have been an elder sister of the strong, tall girl at her side. "Poor little

mother, you look pale !” continued Maisie ;
“ the day has been too long for you.”

“ Yes, mother’s tired,” said a dark-haired man in a light suit ; “ take her up to bed, children.”

Mrs. Marsh laughed.

“ Oh ! no ; I’m as fresh as when I started,” she assured her husband, “ only it was rather hot in the train. But ”—turning to the girls—
“ you ought to be asleep ! ”

“ We were too excited ; we want to know if you have found a house.”

“ Come into the dining-room and I’ll tell you ; I am longing for something to eat.” Mr. Marsh drew a large oak chair to the table for his wife, and Maisie and Dora perched themselves one on each of the velvet padded arms, eager with anticipation.

“ We’ve got the very thing,” said Mr. Marsh, “ or rather not the sort of thing we expected but something quite uncommon. The moment we saw the place, we fell in love with it—went mad over it from turret to basement. A real old Elizabethan house, all panelled in black oak—a house to make you dream of valorous deeds, of courtiers in powder, and ladies in patches. There is a secret room, a tower, tapestry, and four-post bedsteads, upon one

of which Queen Elizabeth is reported to have slept."

"How lovely!" cried Maisie, clapping her hands; but Dora looked thoughtful, and almost awed.

"Is there no electric light, or white paint—nothing modern?" she asked.

"No, and that is where the beauty lies. Everything is in keeping; all the furniture—the chairs and tables—are real antiquities. Each has its history, and many of the things date themselves. Some have the Commonwealth scallop shell, others the crown of the Restoration; and there is armour on the wall that was used at the battle of Naseby. I wonder the owners will let such a place furnished, but they seem very careless, happy-go-lucky people."

"Yes," said Mrs. Marsh, "they looked quite astonished when I asked them to lock up some of the valuable old china. They informed me that times were bad, and they had to let, but it was a great bother. Your father was so taken with 'Castleton' that he wanted to buy it straight out. It was all I could do to prevent him from making a bid in the hall. An old place that has been in the family for centuries is ' 'ely to be sold."

"I long to see it," cried Maisie, helping herself to grapes. "What jolly holidays we shall have."

"Tell me more about it," said Dora. "Is it very large?"

"Yes. They call it the 'Great House' of Castleton; but it is time you went to bed, Miss Curious."

"Not yet. When do we go?"

"To bed?"

"No, to Castleton."

"We've taken it from the end of next week."

"Hurrah! London is getting dreadfully stuffy, and I am sure Miss Mayborne needs a holiday, and will be glad to stop lessons. She is going to the seaside with her mother."

"Somebody else will be glad too," laughed Mrs. Marsh; "and I have an idea that I think will please you. Your father and I have promised to pay a few visits before going to Warwickshire, so I thought, Maisie, that you and Dora might go to Castleton, and have your cousin to stay—a house party of young people on your own account. I am sure King will take care of you all, and see you come to no harm."

King was an elderly housekeeper, who had been with them since Maisie was born.

"How splendid!" cried the girls in chorus.

"Well, you *are* pleased to be rid of us!" said Mr. Marsh, pretending to look hurt, and speaking with much indignation. In a moment both his daughters' arms were round his neck, and he had to struggle to free himself. "Well, don't strangle me, and I will forgive you!" he panted. "But there is no telling what you will be up to in our absence."

"I shall sketch," said Dora.

"Oh, yes," replied Mr. Marsh, "Castleton will afford some real opportunities for our special artist!"

"I suppose," added Maisie, "we can have the horses there? It's so much jollier riding in the country than in London. We are tired of the Row; it's always the same every morning."

"What *blasé* young people! Yes, you sha'n't be docked of the ponies. Castleton has stabling for twenty horses. Now run up to bed before Barker comes to clear away, for you're not fit to be seen! Where are your stockings?"

At the mention of Barker the girls fled, scampering upstairs, conscious of their airy attire. Maisie never stopped running till she reached the upper landing. Then she paused to regain her breath.

"I wonder," she said, "if old King is asleep."

"I should like to go and tell her about Castle-ton, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. She reads in bed, and I don't believe she ever gets off before twelve or one."

They mounted another flight of stairs cautiously, crept past the servants' rooms on tip-toe (for the maids were already in bed), and paused before the housekeeper's door.

Each was so anxious to knock first that they tapped simultaneously a sharp rap with their knuckles.

A little cry, as of some one aroused rudely from slumber, reached their ears, then the hurrying of bare feet across the carpet, and a grey-haired woman in a night-cap appeared in the doorway.

"Is it a fire," she asked, "or burglars?"

Dora smiled soothingly, while Maisie laid her hands on the old woman's trembling shoulders. "Don't be frightened, King," she said. "We only came for a little chat; we did not know you were asleep."

"A little chat, indeed!" snapped King. "A little chat at this hour! What with the start of being shook out of my first sleep, and——"

"But we didn't shake you!" protested Dora.

"You shook my nerves, and it is not good manners, nor yet considerate."

"Oh! Nonsense about your nerves; they are all right."

"That's what the young always think—till it is too late," muttered King, with a melancholy shake of her head. "But my heart won't stand these sort of shocks; I can feel it palpitating still. Nor do I hold with young ladies walking about in them unconventional costumes of a night time, routing a body out of her bed, and behaving as if they had gone clean off their heads. What would Mrs. Marsh think?"

"Oh, Mrs. Marsh is not nearly so easily shocked as you are," said Maisie, with conviction; "but since you've given us such a poor welcome, we won't tell you our news."

"News? What news can there be at this time of night? I've had an evening paper—a late edition. Go to bed, Miss Maisie, and don't be silly; you are old enough to behave like a reasonable lady, and not in this childish fashion."

Thus retorting, King shut her door and turned the key.

"Wasn't she cross?" whispered Dora.

Maisie shrugged her shoulders. "It's physical," she said. "Perhaps there's something in nerves, after all. It would be a real kindness to wake her like that every night—a

sure cure, but too much bother. Come on Dora—I'm getting sleepy."

As Mrs. King returned to bed, she murmured to herself—

"Dear young things! God bless them, they *are* real ladies, and no mistake!"

So she lay down full of tender thoughts that she would sooner have eaten her tongue out than breathed either to Miss Maisie or Miss Dora.

The following day, when the holiday plans were propounded to King, she felt, though she did not mention it, a certain qualm at the idea.

She had been in the country before with her young charges, and remembered well the state of perpetual anxiety in which they had kept her. She strongly disapproved of their "running wild," and lectured against the injudiciousness of climbing trees, and reading books perched high in the branches, of coming in with wet feet after fishing, or riding hatless through the fields, and jumping hurdles, or ditches, with the fearlessness of youth, the recklessness of inexperience.

"It would be all very well if they were boys," she would say, with conviction. "They could spoil their pretty faces and knock themselves to pieces, and what would it matter?"

But to see their delicate skins all brown and freckled, their hair falling nohow, and their clean frocks soiled in an hour, well, it's enough to make a body feel down-hearted."

But Maisie and Dora cared little for her lecturing—in fact they heeded it not at all, going their own sweet ways rejoicing.

"Florence and Rainald have accepted our invitation," said Mrs. Marsh, reading a letter one day about this time. "They are delighted at the idea of coming to Castleton, and you are all to travel down together."

"How lovely!" exclaimed Maisie and Dora in chorus, for these two cousins were their dearest friends: Florence, because of the open admiration she displayed for the Marsh girls; and Rainald, because of his athletic tendencies, in which they revelled.

Rainald had taught Maisie to cast a trout fly, to take back-handers at tennis, and to kick a football in true schoolboy fashion. Dora had learnt from him the art of shooting at a penny with an air-gun, and even hitting it sometimes, while with his catapult she was quite an expert.

So the prospect of the coming holidays took even a rosier form than before, while London, with its dust and heat, seemed daily more distasteful to their impatient souls.

But at last the time for packing and departure arrived. A not unwelcome farewell was said to Miss Mayborne and lesson-books, and the sisters, in fresh white dresses, sprang into the open barouche with a sigh of thankfulness that the hour had come for real relaxation.

At the station they met their cousins, and were soon steaming away countrywards, chatting and laughing with all the exuberance of youth let loose on the world.

At one end of the carriage, looking highly superior in stiff black silk and a formidable bonnet, sat King. She was fanning herself with her pocket-handkerchief, her complexion of a fierce red, melting like gelatine under the influence of the July sun.

The three girls looked cool and comfortable in their light summer frocks, and the boy, too, was attractive; being a manly, handsome fellow, with none of the airs of premature dandyism so often adopted by the rising generation.

As far as Oxford their conversation consisted chiefly in speculating upon the possibilities of Castleton, but here tea was brought them in the train, making a pleasant diversion to the monotony of the journey. Rainald gave

them his views of University life, gleaned from an elder brother at Cambridge, telling a story of a man who bet another that he would crawl back to his rooms on his hands and knees one muddy night, through the town, after dinner. The feat, be it known, was accomplished, greatly to the credit of the talented gentleman and the destruction of his dress clothes, though how the action was construed by those who met him, and were not in the joke, will remain for ever a mystery.

Rainald further informed them that Cambridge was a far better place than Eton, and, with the aid of his brother's innumerable stories, the little Warwickshire station was reached before any one had complained of pins-and-needles or sighed over the length of the journey.

A glorious sun was setting in rivers of gold as they drove through the hilly country, by hedges laden with wild roses, from Moreton-in-the-Marsh, past the tiny village of Barton, to where the "Great House of Castleton," bathed in red sun-rays, reared its ancient towers to the sky.

A cry of delight broke from the girls; they had never imagined in their wildest dreams so beautiful a mansion of "ye olden times."

A sharp turn of the steep road brought it full in view, with its narrow windows and old-fashioned entrance, a sparkling fountain playing in front of the massive door and wide porch, which was probably once filled with benches for the accommodation of visitors until admitted into the hall.

Rainald was the first to alight and peal the huge iron bell, which rang a deep bass note through the grey stone building.

An old woman, looking like a relic of dead and gone generations, opened the door. She had been left in charge till the new comers should arrive.

"What a wonderful place!" cried Dora.

The woman nodded with conviction—she had the family history at her fingers' ends.

"It is," she informed them solemnly, in stilted language, "one of the purest specimens of Jacobean architecture in England, having never been added to nor altered in any way," and then suddenly breaking off: "Ah! deary me!" she muttered, "if the late owner, the poor gentleman that sleeps out there, could have seen this day!" and she pointed with a shaking finger to a little church, standing in the gardens of Castleton.

"Why?" asked Maisie.

“ *Why?* Strangers coming to Castleton—a furnished let! Heaven rest his bones!” and she raised her hands in pious horror.

“ We sha’n’t hurt Castleton,” said Maisie, in amiable but matter-of-fact tones. “ Don’t you worry about it. One lot of people is as good as another, if they don’t break the furniture or set the house on fire !”

CHAPTER II

THE TRUE STORY OF MISTRESS SARAH

THE old hall, with its dais at one end and high carved oak screen at the other, its armour, family portraits, and dark wainscotting, made a deep impression on the new comers. Indeed, few people would have been dull enough to see it without feeling something of the spell of the historic past.

Dora laid a very modern silk parasol on the long oak table, and simply gasped with admiration. Even the immovable King owned it was a fine place, but a bit too uncanny for her liking.

Rainald had just sprung on a chair to examine minutely a broad, old-fashioned sword, when the old woman who had let them in gave vent to a cry, and rushed towards him.

"Oh! sir, come down for mercy's sake. Don't 'e stand with them boots on that

historical piece of furniture. That chair belonged to Archbishop Laud."

"And don't you think he would have stood on it if he had wanted?" replied Rainald. "Tell me about this sword, and I'll get down."

"They do say as it was used at Edgehill," she answered, still watching the chair with a face of horror, but alluding to the weapon on the wall.

"Oh! and that pistol, the spurs, and the cannon-balls," exclaimed Rainald, fairly enchanted with these warlike relics. But the old woman was growing confused at so many questions, and on the verge of tears at the sacrilege wrought upon Castleton by the intrusion of strangers.

Maisie's tender heart was touched. She went up to her, and, slipping half-a-crown into her hand, whispered consolingly: "We'll be very kind to the old place." Then, with a little touch of dry humour that was irresistible, she added, "And thank you for staying and welcoming us so nicely."

The healing power of the coin was instantly made manifest, both in the countenance and demeanour of the worthy dame. She beamed benignly upon Maisie, and informed King that Miss Marsh was "a real lady."

The four cousins lost no time in exploring the wonders of their new abode. The twilight creeping over the panelled rooms gave them a mysteriously gloomy aspect, and the girls kept a little closer together. Rainald walked ahead whistling, as if to frighten away imaginary spectres, and they confessed to each other a certain relief that it was not their lot to sleep in the State Bedchamber, where the curiously-carved bedstead stood in which Queen Elizabeth once reposed.

"It would give me nightmares," said Rainald, with unromantic candour. "I say, girls, don't you feel rather out of place in this sort of get up? We ought to have powdered hair, patches, and all the rest of it. I have an uncomfortable suspicion that all the pictures are frowning at me. Look at that fellow with a point-lace cravat; he positively squints. I wonder if they come out of their frames at night and dance a minuet?"

"Don't, Rainald! Wait till the lamps are lit before you talk such nonsense," said his sister, who was of rather a nervous disposition.

"I say, let us call the woman up and get her to show us the secret room."

"Is there a secret room?"

"Rather!"

"Mrs. Wimple! Mrs. Wimple!" called Rainald over the stairs.

The echo of slow footsteps reached them, and then the croaking voice of the "old retainer."

"We want to see the secret room," they cried with one accord.

"Ay, and it's worth seeing," she retorted. "This way, young ladies; the secret spring is behind the arras in the Cavalier Chamber."

They went expectantly, for Mrs. Wimple spoke with bated breath, as she beckoned them to follow. In the Cavalier Chamber she pointed out pompously a Gothic chest of large proportions, said to be worth over £100. But none of the young people cared to hear its value, for they were busily feeling the walls and searching for an unseen door. Rainald remarked that the chest might be useful in hide-and-seek, but beyond that fact it held no attraction either for him or the girls.

Mrs. Wimple seemed purposely delaying, to excite their curiosity, but at last the spring was touched and the secret chamber revealed.

The room was small and dark.

"I should not care to be boxed in here for long," said Florence. "But how I wish the old

place could speak ; there must be a story about this room."

"Yes, there's a story right enough," muttered Mrs. Wimple.

"Tell it to us," cried Maisie, and as she spoke they all four gathered round eagerly.

The fading daylight crept through the Cavalier Chamber and rested on Mrs. Wimple's snowy hair. A far-away look came in her eyes, as if she saw back into past ages. Then she cleared her throat and began.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Wimple, "them good old times wasn't so good for some, and this story ain't no cock-and-bull tale either, but the solemn, sacred truth, passed down from generation to generation in memory of Mistress Sarah, whose portrait hangs there in the Cavalier Room."

The children glanced curiously at the old-fashioned picture facing them through the door, for they were still standing in the secret, windowless chamber.

"She was pretty," said Florence.

"A real beauty," added Mrs. Wimple. "Look at them eyes! Why, sometimes I feel, when I'm sweeping up in here, as if they followed me about in every corner, till I get quite skeered. Look, too, at 'er

scornful smile. I always fancy as she's turning up 'er nose at the dust, till I most like expect 'er to sneeze."

"What about her when she lived? That's what we want to know," interrupted Rainald.

"Well, her good gentleman, he went along with the Royalists."

"Do you mean her husband?" asked Dora.

Mrs. Wimple nodded.

"Yes, let me see now, it was in the year——"

"Bother the date, we have enough of that at school."

"It was in the year 1642 he followed the un'appy Charles to them 'orrid wars. Well, Mistress Sarah's good man fought for all he was worth, so they say, and after the poor King lost his head, the master of Castleton came back to his lovely young wife, and lived 'appy with 'er till that other Charles began worrying. Kings were a plaguey nuisance in them days, I guess! Then Mistress Sarah was left again, while 'er lord and master gallivanted off to the battle of Worcester. It was the 3rd of September, at night" (Mrs. Wimple spoke impressively), "when Mistress Sarah lay awake, full of fears for her husband. Most like she was tossing on that very bed, under those same old hangings,

tossin' and sighin' and thinkin' of the wars. She was an out-and-out Royalist, but she hadn't much faith in the young King's success—not she!

“It's my belief that she didn't hold with battles and bloodshed, and what those as wasn't killed called glory. She would sooner have had the master at home, and small blame to her either!

“Well, just as she was thinkin' and every-thing was still, she caught the sound of 'orse's 'oofs. She opened her window and strained her eyes to see. She heard it turn into the stable-yard. My word! didn't she dress in a bustle! She was up and down those stairs yonder, unbolting the outer door, before you could say 'Jack Robinson.'

“She had not the spirit to ask her husband, as he came in wet and weary, how the day had gone. She knew too well by his look! He was in no end of a plight, and all his fine clothes scrambled. She made him sit down in a chair, and fetched food and wine, and after 'e'd swallowed a sup and a bite, 'e told 'er the tale of the lost battle, and how the last hope of the Royalists was gone. All the while Mistress Sarah was on the listen for fresh alarms, and her ear was that sharp from anxiety, that she

'eard the sound of fresh riders before they had turned the corner of the road.

" 'The bloodhounds are after you,' she said ; 'you must fly.'

" 'My horse is dead beat,' he answered. 'I've no chance of getting away.'

" Then they thought of the secret chamber, and he ran up here, while his missus cleared away every trace of his arrival downstairs. By this time the soldiers was a-thundering and a-calling at the door, makin' noise enough to rouse the dead, and loudly clamouring to come in.

" You may say what you like about women and their follies, but in times of real downright danger give me a calm, quiet, self-possessed lady like Mistress Sarah. Well, she ups and opens the door quite natural, just as anybody might, only looking surprised and put out at being disturbed.

" She was a haughty young party at times, they say, and I dare say she made them fellows feel small when she asked their reasons for disturbing a quiet household at that time of night. But they'd got their answer—trust them!—and the exact words are written in a book, which the good lady of this house has had printed, called 'History and Description of Castleton.' "

"Can't you remember the words?" asked the girls eagerly.

"I ought to," replied Mrs. Wimple, "I've read them often enough." And striking the attitude of a warrior pointing a bayonet at an enemy, the old woman recited, in a cracked contralto, mimicking the supposed hostile Roundhead—

"We seek a fugitive malignant
Who is being harboured here."

"That was a blow for Sarah!" said Rainald.

"Don't be ribald," whispered Maisie, pinching him.

"And what did Mistress Sarah answer?" asked Florence.

"She told them only her children and her maids were there. But the soldiers pushed past her in the name of Parliament--and you can imagine the mud they brought into the hall--a nice job for those as 'ad to clear it up in the morning.

"They told Mistress Sarah they would make bold to search the house, because there was a tired 'orse in the stables, that let the cat out of the bag. Lor! how her knees knocked together! But do you think she showed her

fear? Not she; she took the whole blessed band from room to room, and stood by a-holdin' of the candle while they sounded the wainscotting, prodded the beds, and cared nothing how they damaged the furniture.

“Those soldiers were reg'lar right down bad uns, you may be sure, or they never would have put a poor lady to all that trouble and inconvenience. They were not even contented with trotting her all over the premises, but woke up her old father-in-law, who was snoring like a steam-engine in the state apartment, where our best bit of tapestry hangs—with ‘a pastoral scene,’ and ‘a tea party in China’—and lots of family pictures. He didn't know the master had come, and swore there was no one there, in all good faith, and he *could* swear, so those say as 'ave written the history of his younger days.

“Then, last of all, they came here to Mistress Sarah's room, this one we calls the Cavalier Chamber, through which the secret room lies, where we're now standin'. As you see, there is no other outlet, and again she 'ad to stand by with 'er 'eart thumping and 'er pulses all of a flutter, while they searched and 'unted as carefully and cautiously in every little crevice as if it was a flea they was after, instead of a man.

But, thank goodness, they didn't find the secret door.

"But there was worse in store for Mistress Sarah. Picture 'er dismay, when the officer announced 'is intention of remaining in the Cavalier Chamber with his men for the rest of the night. Not only this, but 'e took upon 'isself to order up supper for the whole lot. Well, this fairly staggered the mistress, who knew that so long as they were in the Chamber the master could not escape, and she *was* in a pucketery! Of course, it would not 'ave done to lose 'er temper or show annoyance, so she said the best she had was at their service, and added—

"'Will you not descend to the banquet hall, where you can be better served than in this poor chamber?'

"D'you think they'd go? Not a bit of it! I knows men like them nowadays, just as obstinate as mules, though it's true that time they showed a kind of wisdom that puzzled Mistress Sarah.

"'Tis well enow here,' says the officer. 'Food and sleep we want, not ceremonies of serving. I pray you, fair mistress, use what despatch you may.'

"It was a nice kettle of fish for poor Mistress

Sarah, but she dare not try to persuade them to go, for fear they should smell a rat.

"So she hurried downstairs and set her maids to work to prepare a meal. I suppose it was different in those days, but I can't think how they had food enough to provide for a whole regiment at a few moments' notice. I'd 'ave been sorry enough to do it, knowing what appetites they'd got!"

"But we want to know what happened," Rainald cried impatiently.

"Yes, of course. Well, having told this story so often, I strays a bit at times. So Mistress Sarah, she goes herself down into the cellar to draw the wine, having, mind you, first paid a visit to her medicine-chest, which was well stored. A regular chemist's shop 'twas, for she did a deal of good in the village, and could doctor the people as well as any physician, which they were not common then, and about every country town, drivin' their gigs with a servant in buttons.

"Well, from that there medicine-chest Mistress Sarah took a bottle of stuff, and—bless 'er brave 'eart!—mixed it with the wine. Then she sent up the meal, feeling most like on the top-rail by now, and all them greedy men fell to eating, which I couldn't 'ave done

knowing I'd not been invited, nor wasn't wanted either. But they'd no manners, and as long as the food was good and the wine plentiful, they didn't care how they came by it.

"Every now and again Mistress Sarah sneaked up to the door to listen, and a lot of pretty talk she 'eared, for the soldiers did not pick their language, little thinking that a lady's ear was at the keyhole. Nasty, boasting fellows talking, with their mouths full, of the murderous deeds they'd done. Mistress Sarah gathered they were after Charles the Second, and were cocksure of catching him. They spoke most disrespectful of the King, seeing as they was all commoners themselves, and called 'im 'the young man!' Well, a king is a man, and he may be young, but it don't seem to me right for inferiors to speak about him in that off-'and manner. It sort of went against Mistress Sarah, but she didn't stop listening for all that.

"Presently, by degrees the loud talking died away as the men got drowsy, and at last she could hear nothing but their heavy breathing, for they'd all gone sound off—drugged by the wine. My word, hadn't she made it strong! And them being tired into the bargain, it worked the easier.

"Once sure they was all insensible and as safe as the dead, the mistress turned the handle and came in gently-like. There lay all her visitors with mouths gaping and eyes shut, some on the floor, some in chairs with their feet upon the needlework, and the officer lying across Mistress Sarah's own bed, with 'is coat off and 'is muddy boots on the pillow. But she didn't mind that, though her linen was the finest in the country. They might have torn it in rags, so long as they went to sleep afterwards and lay sound.

"She passed them by, without a thought for their odd attitudes, though I do say it was real, right-down cheek of that officer, and if I'd been there, seeing he was drugged, I would 'ave rolled 'im on to the floor for two pins! But the mistress, she only stopped to test their sleep, one by one, and make sure it was no sham. Then she crept to the arras, and disappeared behind it.

"Out she came again, holding her breath and white to her lips, with the master after her, a-pickin' his way through the bodies, as if they was so many puddles on a muddy crossing.

"And they shut the door behind them, and left the Roundheads to finish their nap."

"Splendid," cried the girls.

"What a score!" ejaculated Rainald.

"Well, the master's 'orse was still too worn out and lame to be of any use," continued the old woman, "but the officer's having been well-fed and cared for, was in a better plight, so Mistress Sarah's good man borrowed him, and Mistress Sarah watched 'er 'usband gallop away, till he was out of sight up the hill."

"And what happened the next morning?" asked Maisie.

"Oh! the men woke up feeling very sorry for themselves, and they said some funny things about the master's cellar. They was all so weak and bilious, each one swore worse than the last, and the officer took longer than any to wake, and when 'e did get to 'is feet, 'e felt like an 'a'porth of treacle in a mug!

"Talk of disappointment and rage! The wonder was they didn't fire Castleton, or murder the young mistress right out. For it seems they thought the fugitive she 'arboured was the King 'isself, no less a personage than Charles the Second. It was bad enough to find their prey had escaped, but the straw what breaks the camel's hump, as the proverb says, was the discovery that 'e'd taken the best of their 'orses!

"But though they talked so big, nothing

very bad happened, except a fine upon the estate, which wasn't of much account to the master, who had money no end, and could afford to pay. So in less than two years 'e came back 'ome to Mistress Sarah, and lived quite quietly through the Commonwealth."

"I'm glad he wasn't killed," said Florence, with a sigh of relief. "I was so dreadfully afraid they were going to catch him."

"You are a born story-teller, Mrs. Wimple!" Maisie declared, looking with great admiration at the old woman. "You really must go down and tell it all to King."

"Why, it has grown quite dark," said Dora, "and we never noticed it. This room is much more interesting now we know the history. Poor Mistress Sarah, what a night she had!"

"I don't like this place now the light has gone," said Florence, nervously. "Let's go down."

"Wasn't it a pity," remarked Dora, when Mrs. Wimple had retired to the kitchen, "that the story was not told in beautiful, romantic language, and without the dropping of so many h's."

"All the same it was very funny, and I do hope she will repeat it to King," laughed Maisie. "King is so dreadfully incredulous,

she would snort through the whole tale from beginning to end, and say: 'Rubbish!' and 'How do you know?'"

"Of course, it's really true, because Mrs. Wimple was chiefly quoting from the old printed history of Castleton House," said Florence.

"Well, I shall go to-morrow to the secret chamber with a big broom to sweep up all the h's," declared Rainald; and there the discussion ended.

CHAPTER III

GHOST

“WE must see the grounds by moonlight,” declared the girls one evening. “There’s a lovely harvest moon just rising, and it’s bad to go to bed directly after supper.”

So, seizing hats and wraps, they wandered out into the old-fashioned flower garden, with its turfed walks, formal beds of quaint plants, and sweet-smelling blossoms. The rows of box-bushes, cut into fantastic shapes, dotted here and there, especially fascinated these young people, whose heads were quite turned by now with the romantic charm of the place.

“Let’s play ‘ghost,’” said Rainald. “It would be awfully exciting here in a strange garden by moonlight. I’ll be the ghost in a light wrapper, and Florence can lend me her white shawl to put over my head. You girls

won't see where I am hiding, and I shall spring out and chase you unexpectedly. You will never know when I am going to appear, and you must always turn and run."

Maisie owned there were possibilities in the game, but Dora and Florence felt a little frightened.

"Supposing a real ghost were to come, and we mistook it for Rainald," Florence suggested.

"Oh, you *are* a muff!" jeered her brother. "Of course there are no such things as ghosts really."

The uncomplimentary term, "a muff," decided Florence, who banished her fears and consented to play.

The three girls kept close together as they wandered by the box-bushes, wondering where the ghost would hide. Florence held Dora's hand tightly, and dared not let it go, her vivid imagination making the game a living terror for her.

"He isn't in the flower-garden, I am sure," said Maisie. "Let us go to another part of the grounds — by the tennis-lawns. Mrs. Wimple said one of them was the ancient bowling-green."

"No—keep near the house."

"Well, I am going," retorted Maisie.

The two nervous ones felt a certain support in Maisie's presence, and followed, unwilling to be left to themselves. They began to wish they had shown more resolution in refusing to play, yet at the same time the thrill of terrified anticipation curdled their blood with a certain pleasurable excitement.

"Something is rustling behind those plants," whispered Dora.

"Oh! oh! oh!" cried Florence, running as fast as her legs could carry her across the lawns, whitened by moonlight and peopled with a thousand shadows which she fancied took shape and form to pursue her. Dora followed, but Maisie, the fastest runner of all, outpaced them. Fearfully they glanced back. Gliding quietly after them stole a figure in a long white sheet, with something soft and woolly over its head and flapping arms. It uttered low spasmodic cries and groans, like a creature in pain.

On, on they fled breathlessly, expecting every moment to be overtaken, to find themselves grasped by the outstretched hands, till turning to give up from utter exhaustion, lo! and behold, the ghost had vanished, and was nowhere to be seen.

"How horrid of Rainald, he is making this game so dreadfully uncanny," said Florence.

"Lovely!" Maisie retorted; "my flesh is simply creeping! Come along, we must look again."

This time they walked nearer the house, down a wide terrace, for the lights from the windows gave Florence confidence.

A sudden turn revealed the ghost seated on a large wooden flower-pot, in which an orange tree was planted. He was entirely shrouded in white, no particle of his darker clothing being visible. The moaning came fitfully as he rocked himself to and fro. The moon, which a second before had been hidden by a cloud, now burst forth afresh, giving a ghastly appearance to the shrouded figure.

The girls did not run away, though even Maisie's boldness failed her for a moment. They stood watching, like people turned to stone, surprised at the weird effect produced by Rainald's spectre.

Florence's teeth chattered, and Dora nearly fell down, so astonished was she at thus suddenly confronting the ghost, which rose slowly to its feet, pushed aside the orange branches, and advanced towards them. Remembering the rules of the game, they fled before it, but

even as they ran, a real living terror took possession of their souls. From within the walls of Castleton came a series of piercing shrieks—screams that echoed and re-echoed.

The ghost let his sheet and shawl drop unheeded on the gravel path, while the girls, no longer afraid of him, but paralysed by a fresh fear, ran to the open windows.

"What is the matter?" they called.

The sound of hurrying feet through the passages, and violent sobbing in the kitchen, confirmed their fears.

"It was a real ghost screaming," said Dora; "and the servants are crying with fright."

Dashing wildly into the house, they all ran to the kitchen.

"What was that screaming?" demanded Maisie.

"If you please, miss," replied the cook, "it was Sarah!"

The children staggered back.

"*Mistress Sarah!*" they cried.

"Oh! how horrible! Does she haunt Castleton?"

"Sarah, the kitchenmaid," the cook replied; "she is in hysterics."

At the far end of the large room sat a weeping girl, her face buried in her apron.

"Why are you crying?—and why did you scream like that? You nearly frightened us into a fit," said Maisie again.

"Oh! the ghost! the ghost!" sobbed Sarah. "I went to pull down the blinds, and I saw it sitting and moaning—a horrible thing in white. You saw it, too, you know you did, Miss Maisie. You, and the other young ladies—in the garden. You ran away from it—and it followed—and it had no legs, but it could go as fast as any of you. Oh dear, oh dear, I wish I had never left London! I can't stay here, it will kill me! Oh dear, oh dear!"

"Stop crying, Sarah, directly, and don't be so silly," ordered Maisie, somewhat sharply. "We were playing at ghost, it is a new sort of hide-and-seek, and you saw Master Rainald in a sheet."

But Sarah would not be pacified till Rainald fetched the garments and put them on. Then she shrieked again, because, she said, "her nerves was that upset."

Mrs. King, who had been upstairs, now appeared upon the scene, and scolded everybody roundly, but Sarah in particular, threatening to throw cold water over her if she did not "stop that noise."

The threat had a good effect upon the girl,

but Maisie and the others went somewhat guiltily to bed, feeling their game had not been altogether a success. Still they could not help laughing a little at the thrilling finale, though they came to the conclusion it might be better not to play at "ghost" again.



She looked very pretty and fearless in her white dress
on the spirited pony.



CHAPTER IV

"THE MASQUERADERS"

"O H! do come into the library," called Maisie after breakfast next morning, and her voice denoted excitement.

No answer. She waited impatiently, then ran to the chestnut parlour, a room with deep cupboards full of valuable old china.

"I say, Dora, Florence, Rainald—I've got such a find!"

"Where?"

"In the library."

They followed her to a panelled apartment, the literary treasures of which received none of their attention. What did the fine collection of volumes—the county histories, and a first edition of "Eikon Basilike," which would have been a gem to bibliomaniacs—matter to them? All their attention was given to a carved chest, which Maisie opened, exclaiming—

"Behold my treasures!"

Dora peered in, and drew out a quaint gown, an embroidered waistcoat, some small blue satin shoes with the highest heels she had ever seen, and sundry other garments of a similar type.

"What lovely things to dress up in!" she cried.

"Yes," replied Maisie; "these must be some worn-out theatrical costumes that the people here have used for amateur theatricals, tableaux, or charades. Upstairs I found the remains of a stage and lots of scenery."

"But this looks like really good old needle-work," Florence declared, pulling out a long green robe, with flowers wrought in divers colours upon the surface.

"No, they can't be good," said Maisie, "or the people would have locked the chest or put them away. Let us turn the whole lot on to the floor; then we shall be able to see them better. Here is a deliciously old-fashioned muslin gown; I'm sure they had it copied from some of the old pictures."

Rainald seized a point-lace cravat.

"I declare that old fellow over the door is wearing a thing exactly like this."

A cry of delight broke from Dora as she

waved a huge poke bonnet of grotesque shape and size above her head. "This is what the heroine eloped to Gretna Green in," she said. "What a thorough stage get-up!"

She tied the queer thing on her sunny locks, and pirouetted round the room.

"Oh, this is best of all," from Maisie, as she drew out an old-fashioned riding costume, made in red, and cut to resemble the pictures of Di Vernon.

"It's awfully shabby, but very quaint," said Florence, looking at the faded scarlet, with its trimmings of tarnished gold.

"These things carry me back for hundreds of years," cried Dora, removing her poke bonnet to Rainald's cropped head. "Supposing, just for to-day, we all dress up and pretend to be the old ancestors revived."

"If we do," retorted Maisie, "we must not frivol or make fun. I think it would be a grand idea if we really played the parts in regular downright earnest, and imagined that the olden times had returned. It would be easy enough in Castleton."

"Of course we must powder our hair, and do it up in the old-fashioned style. Is there any powder?"

"I think so. If not, we'll try flour. I dare say it will answer as well."

No sooner said than done. They were all fascinated by the alluring prospect of a masquerade, and acted immediately upon Dora's suggestion.

"I'll have this," and "I'll have that," became the order of the day, till the ransacking of the oak chest was completed.

Then grasping the spoils, they rushed to their rooms, and commenced elaborate toilettes.

Maisie was great at hair-dressing, and in a short time Dora and Florence appeared transformed.

"Who is to wear the riding costume?" asked Dora.

"You had better," replied Maisie. "It is too small for me, and Florence will look so sweet in this little blue silk dress, with a high waist, and those queer shoes. Do they pinch you frightfully? Oh! never mind, bear them for a bit. I say, powder does suit you! It's a funny combination, powdered hair and sunburn."

As she spoke, Maisie dipped her own locks into a large pot of flour, and coiled them up with dexterous fingers.

"I have set my heart on the white muslin,

such a duck of a gown! And mind, I am Mistress Sarah; you two can choose any other characters you like."

At last, arrayed in all their finery, the three quaint figures sailed down the corridor and made a triumphal entry into the hall.

At the far end, seated on the daïs, in one of the Commonwealth chairs, they espied a Cavalier, who, rising, bowed low. Buckled at his side was the sword taken from the wall, used, it was said, at Edgehill.

Maisie eyed it suspiciously, then glanced at the nail from which it had hung.

"Thou art a thief," she said; "thou hast robbed Castleton."

"Lady, you are mistaken," quoth the Cavalier; "I carried this weapon at my side all through the great Stuart struggle, and many a valiant deed hath it done."

"Cease your boasting," replied the lady haughtily. "No gallant gentleman would dream of coming armed into the presence of Mistress Sarah and her handmaids. It is an insult to me—a slur upon Castleton. Put back the sword that thou hast stolen, and, perchance, I may forgive thee thy braggart folly!"

"Fair dame," replied the Cavalier, "I see

that thou covetest the sword which hath slain so many foes of our good King Charles, and since it is handsomely bejewelled, I will offer it as a tribute of respect."

So saying, he unbuckled the weapon and, kissing it, held it out to Mistress Sarah.

"I will have none of it. All women are not blinded by fair words and courtly speech."

The Cavalier grew angry. He flung his sword upon the oaken floor, thereby making such a clatter that Mistress Sarah feared for her furniture, and thought it better to conciliate the gentleman she had enraged.

"It is not worth so many angry words or evil tempers—that inanimate steel!" she said courteously, "but there is one in my household named Dame Wimple, who doth sorely grieve when my armour or weapons of valour are disturbed. She loveth not sportive youths, and did roundly rate a young knight from Harrow, who leapt upon the chair of an Archbishop for the purpose of scanning that very sword. So, I pray you, let the matter pass, and lay what blame may rankle in your heart upon the worthless shoulders of that domestic firebrand!"

"Your explanation doth verily appease me.

Now, pray, present your humble servant to these two stately handmaids."

Dora stepped forward, and curtsied low to Rainald.

"Mistress Sarah is in grievous error, be it told. I am no handmaid, but the Lady Margaret Lapworth, of high rank and great renown. Mistress Sarah means no harm, but she doth oft forget, her brain being clouded and much confused since the strange adventure of the Roundheads' midnight intrusion and the long absence of her missing lord."

"I wot not," the Cavalier replied, "that I stood in the presence of so illustrious a matron."

"Aye! and we *are* illustrious," continued Lady Margaret, shaking the flour from her hair upon the step of the daïs. "The pedigree of our house dates back to Brute, the first king of Britain, and we have intermarried with the Tudor and many other noble families."

"And is the silent damsel yonder also of high rank?" asked the Cavalier, pointing to the blue-clad figure.

"Nay, that is but my abigail, Philippa, a buxom wench, and quick with her needle; she doth wait upon me and Mistress Sarah."

"Oh! happy dames to be attended by one so comely."

"Pay not these fulsome compliments."

"Fair lady, I did but mean the damsel's face reflected the beauty of her mistress. Say, doth thy lord and master live?"

"Nay, sire, he hath long been buried. He fell in battle like a noble soldier. Many sturdy knights have wooed me since, but I would give ear to none of them."

"And why so hard to please?"

She drew herself up and ran the riding-whip she held through her slim fingers.

"I am the Lady Margaret Lapworth!"

"Of which fact," replied the Cavalier, "thou hast apprised me already."

"Then for me must be found the bravest in the land, a warrior before whose sword the boldest fly—one upon whose breast the deeds of valour lie displayed in medals of gold and silver—one who will not sue, but command, and if for vagary I deny him, will by force carry me away to some great castle by the sea, where the priest should be waiting! For the sake of such a gallant only would I resign the name of Lapworth."

"By my troth! he is here before you, and waits not for the denial of which thou hast lightly spoken—not on bended knee, but sword in hand, he comes to claim the Lady Margaret.



"Fly, varlet, to yonder stables."

[To face p. 51.]

The Castle by the Sea is some hundreds of miles or more from the stately towers of Mistress Sarah's noble mansion, but the journey is merely as a stone's throw to the heart of an eager knight. Thou art attired for the ride—three hundred miles as the crow flies: think you it will bring fatigue? Mistress Sarah, pardon my seeming haste to quit your roof, but time presses, and we must away."

"Not so fast," cried Mistress Sarah; "I dearly love the Lady Margaret, and it letteth me sore to part from her. It seemeth thou wouldst pilfer the guest beneath my roof, as well as the armoury."

"Nay, Mistress Sarah, thou art much misled, or else thou speakest but in jest! Ah, there is thy serving man. Oddsfish! why doth he stare at me as if I were a masquerader?"

The Cavalier pointed to an astonished footman who had just entered the hall, and was quite unprepared for this very whimsical comedy.

"Fly, varlet, to yonder stables; order my lady's palfrey and my charger, with all speed. We are booted and spurred to start. Let there be no delay."

"Is it Bell and Bob you want saddled, sir?" the man asked in amazement.

"Quick, quick! Time presses! What matter these common-sounding names? They are insults to our noble steeds!"

The footman hurried away to deliver the message, and informed the coachman that everybody had gone daft together.

"Prithee wish me God-speed!" cried the bride-elect, embracing Mistress Sarah, "and cast after me a satin slipper for luck."

Just then Dora's new pony, which she had not yet ridden, was brought to the door, with little bay Bob for Rainald.

The groom, on seeing the children's get-up, could hardly restrain his merriment. His usually grave face became convulsed, and he grinned from ear to ear.

"What aileth the man?" cried Rainald. "Hath he never seen my lady mounted on a palfrey? Perchance he smileth because our steeds are not suitably caparisoned, though at Castleton it should not be so. Whence came this pigmy saddle?"

"It is the property of Mistress Sarah," answered Lady Margaret.

"Farewell," cried the little serving-maid, stepping forward and curtsying low.

Then as they rode away, she took the tiny high-heeled slipper that had sorely pinched

her toes, and flung it after them, while Mistress Sarah waved good-bye, inwardly marvelling at Dora's courage in passing the lodge in such ridiculous attire.

CHAPTER V

A SHOCKING ERROR

AS Dora and Rainald rode off in their queer old-world costumes, they were quite carried away by the interest of the game. Dora felt exactly as if she really were the Lady Margaret, and forgot all about the absurdity of her powdered hair and scarlet habit. The gold on her cuffs pleased her, and she hardly noticed it was tarnished. Besides, her pony was new and strange, and she found him such a handful she had no time to converse with her Cavalier as they turned down the hill towards Barton.

The first rude shock which awoke her from the dream was a roar of laughter from a group of boys.

“Hi! Jim, here’s a circus coming!”

But her Cavalier, riding at them with his whip, cried—

“Take care—or you shall answer for it with your lives!”

The boys fled hastily, and Rainald pointed proudly to their retreating forms.

A short distance further they passed a cottage. The inmates—an old woman and three children—came out excitedly, and stood by the gate, with open mouths and widely expanded eyes.

Lady Margaret's colour rose. She began to feel a little conspicuous. Moreover, the new pony was pulling horribly, and rapidly getting beyond her control.

She felt at a disadvantage, for the sleeves of her coat were so tight they cramped the muscles of her arms, and the flour shook off her fringe into her eyes, so that she could hardly see. It was with difficulty she balanced the old-fashioned hat on her head, and, alas! her elaborate coiffure was slowly descending. She could feel the hair-pins slipping from her head.

“I—I—can't hold—this—animal,” she gasped.

“I'll stop!” answered Rainald, who was a little ahead. And he drew in his pony, and tried to snatch at Dora's bridle as her new purchase bolted past. But the attempt was

fruitless, and the next he saw was Dora's hat flying to the ground, and her unmanageable cob galloping at breakneck speed down the straight country road. He knew if he followed her that the sound of pursuing hoofs would only madden the runaway, and increase his speed. So, wisely reigning in his pony, he did the best thing possible—kept quiet and waited.

Oh! what a ride that was for Dora! A full mile ahead she could see the road, mercifully untenanted by cart or carriage. On either side was a deep ditch and high hedge.

The furious pace increased, and, dropping her whip, Dora wound the reins round both her wrists, grasping them firmly near the bit.

"Come in, will you?" she said between her teeth. "Bell—you brute—steady!—steady!"

But though she strained her muscles till they stood out in knots upon her arms, the iron mouth of the pony remained unaffected. All she could do was to sit tight, hold firmly with her knees, and trust to Providence.

A less self-possessed rider might have flung herself to the ground, but Dora had sense to know that such a course would be absolute madness. She remembered in those awful moments the ridiculous pantomime of the

afternoon, and wondered if this were the end of it all.

For a while she slackened the reins, and tried to think how pleasant it ought to be, this rushing through the air. But no, the exhilaration of movement was not for her, not in a ride of peril on an unknown pony, with jaws of steel.

Then she fell to pulling again, pulling with all her might and main, till gradually the pace lessened.

The little village of Barton had been reached, she turned Bell's head into a high wall, and leapt from the saddle with a prayer of thankfulness.

A pitiable object she looked in her red habit, braided with gold, her hair half up, half down, and the powder on her coat and neck. No hat, no whip—a dilapidated creature, looking neither old-world nor yet modern, holding the bridle tremblingly.

For the moment Dora felt inclined to cry. She dared not attempt to mount again, and, to her horror, she was standing by the gates of a large house. What if she should be seen!

Even as the thought crossed her mind, a dog-cart drove up, with a young man and a groom. Just as they were turning in at the gates they caught sight of Dora.

She saw the surprise on the gentleman's face, as he handed the reins to the groom, and jumped down.

The embarrassed Lady Margaret turned as scarlet as her coat, her lips trembled, and tears welled into her eyes.

"Have you had an accident?" he asked kindly, raising his hat.

"Yes," she replied. "My pony ran away. I am afraid to mount him again. I am not strong enough to hold him in."

As she spoke she stretched out her aching arms to relieve their stiffness.

"Are you far from home?"

"I have come from Castleton," she answered.

"Oh! I know the people there, but they are away."

"Yes, we have taken the house."

"I see. Now shall I tell you the best thing to do?"

Dora nodded. She was still painfully conscious of her attire, but too shy to explain that she had dressed up for fun.

"You had better let my man take your pony back, and I will drive you to Castleton."

A sigh of relief escaped Dora, for she had dreaded the long walk alone in her hateful garments.

"Oh! thank you so much," she said gratefully.

He called the groom, and gave Bell into his charge.

"Now," he said, "we will be back at Castle-ton before your people have time to be anxious."

He helped the grotesque little figure into the dogcart, gathered up the reins, and started at a brisk pace.

Dora felt she ought to say something, but every time she tried to frame the words of apology for her riding gear, a paralysing nervousness held her dumb.

"Were you alone?" he asked at last.

"No, I—I was with—a boy."

"What has become of him?"

As the stranger asked the question, another astounding object came in sight—a miniature Cavalier, in lace and brocade, riding as if hard pressed, and evidently searching for the missing lady.

With all her heart Dora wished he had not followed. She longed to get down and hide her head for very shame. What would this strange gentleman think of them? Oh! how could Rainald be so foolish? Why had he not returned?

"This is evidently your escort," said the voice at her side, speaking quite seriously, though Dora thought she read amusement in his eyes.

"Yes," she gasped, "it's the boy I went out riding with—my cousin, Rainald Templeton."

"Thrice welcome the sight of Lady Margaret," cried the Cavalier, riding up unabashed; "I thought that thou wast killed!"

His words infuriated Dora.

"Don't be so silly," she called out; "that horrid Bell ran away——"

"Well, I could see that," retorted Rainald, dropping the old-world language.

"And this gentleman very kindly offered to drive me home. You had better get back as quickly as you can, Rainald, and take off those silly clothes."

"Speak for yourself," he retorted. "But it's awfully good of you to give her a lift, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Saltire," replied the gentleman.

The Cavalier doffed his hat, and rode ahead at furious speed—looking not the least depressed.

The gates of Castleton were open wide to receive them, and Dora breathed freely once

more when they turned out of the road and were again on private ground.

But here a fresh surprise awaited Mr. Saltire.

Grouped upon the steps were three figures. The Cavalier, talking excitedly, an elegant lady in old-fashioned white muslin and powdered hair, with serving maid beside her, equally quaintly gowned, and all looking veritable pictures in the bright afternoon sunshine.

They advanced to greet Dora and the stranger.

"We are so indebted to you, Mr. Saltire," Maisie said, with her sweetest smile and loftiest manner, "for your timely aid and kindness to Dora."

She gave him her little sunburnt hand, and from her height he imagined she was really a grown-up lady, masquerading with the children to amuse them.

"I'm only too glad," he answered, "to be of service. "Ah! there is my man with your sister's pony. I should not advise you," turning to Dora, "to ride him again."

She gathered up her habit and sprang from the dog-cart.

Her relief at finding that the others had not

disrobed was so great that she began to feel quite merry. Besides, they didn't appear the least confused or distressed at being discovered in their extraordinary clothes.

"We thought you wouldn't be long," said Mistress Sarah to Lady Margaret, "so Philippa and I sat in the porch and waited."

"Well, I hope you are none the worse for the adventure," Mr. Saltire said to Dora as he turned to go.

"No," she replied, laughing, "but I *am* glad to be home!"

"Well, goodbye," he said as he held out his hand; "don't get into any more mischief."

"No, no," cried Maisie, "now you have come so far you *must* stay to tea. At least, if you don't mind schoolroom tea."

The young man looked surprised. This unconventional invitation from a lady he did not know somewhat took him aback."

"A thousand thanks, but I am afraid——" he began.

"Oh! I say, do come," said Rainald, drawing him into the hall, and shutting the door. "Come on, there's the tea bell."

He followed the Cavalier and the three powdered ladies to the dining-room, where

tapestry and old oak panelling seemed quite in keeping with their garments.

Maisie took the head of the table, still retaining her grown-up air, and looking uncommonly pretty, and Mr. Saltire, very puzzled, was sat down to bread and jam amidst a pleasant flow of childish chatter.

"Are you going to the county ball next week, Miss Marsh?" he asked at last.

At this Rainald nearly exploded with laughter, which he managed to cover with a sneeze, while Dora and Florence exchanged significant glances. But Maisie was equal to the occasion.

"No," she replied, "I suppose I'm getting *blasé*, but one does feel a little off dancing at the end of the season, you know."

As she spoke the door opened, and Mrs. Wimple came in, unceremoniously holding aloft the blue satin slipper Florence had thrown after the bride.

The look on her face was so awful, that, for a moment, no one spoke.

"What *is* the matter, Mrs. Wimple?" asked Maisie at last.

"Matter! Matter enough, in all conscience!" she cried, wringing her hands. "Oh! what sinfulness!"

"Pray explain yourself," said Maisie, still with her "Mistress Sarah" air of grown-up grandeur.

"Them garments!" exclaimed Mrs. Wimple. "Them priceless heirlooms," pointing to the children's clothes. "Where did you get the key of the chest?"

An uncomfortable sensation began to steal over the party.

"It was open—unlocked—besides, this old theatre rubbish can't matter. You're not serious, Mrs. Wimple—you—you did not mean *heirlooms*!" Maisie gasped out the words spasmodically; she could feel her heart thumping under her white muslin bodice.

"Unlocked—open!" Mrs. Wimple could hardly believe her ears.

"Yes, indeed!" chimed in Dora, "go upstairs and look for yourself. You don't mean to say these things are of any value?"

"Where are your eyes, young ladies? Why, Mr. Saltire 'ere could tell you a different tale, they being the talk of the countyside. That there waistcoat, what Master Rainald is wearing, has the Tudor Rose embroidered on it, and the lace cravat is the celebrated one in the family portrait. The things are hundreds of years old, and worth as many pounds. Oh, my word, if

the missus could see you! I all but dropped down with surprise as I come up the gravel path to pay my respects to Mrs. King, which she asked me to do over a cup of tea, and found this Elizabethan slipper a-lying out of doors. Such treasures as they are, too—what ought to be kep' under a glass case in a museum. What will the mistress say?"

A sense of gradually awakening horror crept over the girls and Rainald, as they stared at Mrs. Wimple, hardly yet able to realise the enormity of what they had done.

"Seeing the slipper give me a nice turn," went on Mrs. Wimple. "But when I comes in and finds you all a-sittin' that calm and placid in these valued relics, you could knock me down with a feather, you could. My blood's regular froze up, and I'm all of a tremble."

"We didn't know, we didn't know. How could we, when some careless person left the chest open? We would not have done it for all the world; and the rest of the things are lying in a heap on the library floor."

This last intimation was too much. Mrs. Wimple fled upstairs, half weeping, to wail over and rearrange the desecrated heirlooms, while the children gazed at each other in dismay.

"Are you sure she means it?" said Maisie.
"Can we have done anything so dreadful?"

"I'm afraid it is, unfortunately, the truth," said Mr. Saltire. "I knew the clothes directly I saw them. On rare occasions they have been taken with great pride and reverence from their long resting place, and displayed to appreciative guests, who were barely allowed to touch the treasures."

"And I—I have been out riding in them!" groaned Dora.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner, Mr. Saltire?"

"I thought, of course, that you knew!"

"And they are friends of yours—the owners of Castleton? Oh dear; aren't you shocked?"

"I don't think I look very shocked, do I?"

"Oh! it's all very well for you to laugh; you are not in the wrong. And how shall we explain? Besides, I don't suppose these clothes were in the inventory."

"Hardly. But take another view. Wasn't it exceedingly careless of Mrs. Weston to leave the chest unlocked?"

"It showed she trusted us."

"Not a bit of it," replied Mr. Saltire, "it was simply forgetfulness! That is Mrs. Weston all over! She has only lately come

"I can only believe the reins
were put on her. It was old Mr.
Barton's father, who would have
been glad if any one had made light
of her. The young couple are very
kind, and care for horses and outdoor

life, and I am glad to breathe more freely.
I'll tell them, and apologise," she
said. "Pity the old man isn't alive
to be sorry he died, but——"

She paled, and grew red. What
was she was saying! Perhaps the
young man was a great friend of Mr.
Barton even. But her mind was
at rest by the young man, who

"is rather lucky. Dick will be easier
to get on with."

"Is Dick?"

"The present owner, Dick Weston. He
and his wife are coming to us to-night, to
stay or two at Barton."

"I'll consider a moment."

"What had I better do?"

Saltire looked at the pretty, troubled
girl and made a suggestion.

"Supposing you come and call on Mrs.

Weston, and explain your little mistake. I will prepare her for it, and then your mind will be quite at rest. I don't suppose the things are much the worse for their outing."

"How kind of you! Mother liked Mrs. Weston so much, and you won't forget to put in a word for us, will you, Mr. Saltire?"

"I never saw any one look quite so miserable as your poor little sister," Mr. Saltire remarked to Maisie, as Dora ran away. "I was really sorry for her, and I'm so fond of children! I am quite vexed with Mrs. Weston for leaving such a silly trap for you and the youngsters to fall into; but it is just possible she might turn up a bit rusty, unless you call and see her. One can never tell how people will take things."

"The blame is entirely mine. I am the eldest, and ought to have had more sense. Besides, I discovered the chest and opened it."

Maisie accompanied him to the door, sweeping her trailing skirts across the hall, and then flew upstairs, holding her skirts to her knees, and bounded into the room where Dora was undressing.

"Oh, such a joke!" she cried, unfastening the gown with great alacrity. "Mr. Saltire thought I was grown up, and called you the 'youngsters.' I nearly died of laughing."

"Yes," retorted Dora, "and asked you if you were going to the county ball! Did you ever hear anything so absurd?"

"It was a splendid 'take in,'" replied Maisie, secretly much gratified at Mr. Saltire's mistake. "I am very tall, and I've rather an old face."

"Oh, rubbish, it looked babyish!" said Dora. "He must be rather green."

"There I don't agree with you," replied her sister. "It was a most natural conclusion. Besides, he was most kind to you, Dora. You should be the last to call him names."

"I didn't call him names. I only said he was green. And he deserves that for calling us 'youngsters.'"

"He didn't mean it rudely. Oh," stepping out of the muslin skirt, "I shall be thankful to see the last of these precious clothes! Ring for Mary to take them back to the library. Catch me ever meddling with other people's things again!"

CHAPTER VI

THE EAST TOWER

MRS. KING was very shocked when she heard from Mrs. Wimple of the escapade with the heirlooms, and declared, almost with tears, that it was "heart-breaking to be left in charge of such a harum-scarum crew!"

Indeed, she went so far as to tell Maisie and Dora seriously, that "they were saying in the village that Castleton has been let for a lunatic asylum!"

"Dear old King," coaxed Maisie, "don't be cross! Try and see the humour of it, and then you won't feel half so bad about what the villagers say. I don't care a bit for them, I'm only sorry for the clothes."

"Clothes can't talk, but bodies can," replied King sententiously, "and Miss Dora was seen being driven back by that strange gentleman

you asked in to tea. Oh, what would Mrs. Marsh say, so particular as she is about the acquaintances you make!"

"Do you think it mattered?" asked Maisie.
"He seemed very nice."

"Not matter?" responded King indignantly; "why, when James came and told me a stranger was having tea in the school-room, my heart fairly rose to my mouth. I didn't like to come in and interfere then, but——"

"I should think not," interrupted Maisie.

"Oh, King, what an awful idea!"

"But I was in twenty minds to do it," declared the indignant housekeeper righteously. As she spoke Mrs. Wimple came to the door in a fuss for the rest of the clothing.

"Do you know anything of the gentleman that intruded himself upon my young ladies this afternoon?" Mrs. King asked.

"You mean young Mr. Saltire, from Barton House? I should think I did know 'im, bless 'is 'eart! I've watched 'im since 'e toddled about in a white frock and blue shoes—with yellow curls a-flying in the wind."

"Well, curls or no curls," said Mrs. King sternly, "he'd got no business here."

"No right here!" almost shrieked Mrs. Wimple. "Why 'e knows every stone of Castleton. The Saltires and Westons are that united, it's more like one family nor two!"

"But the Westons are not here now," retorted Mrs. King severely.

Mrs. Wimple sailed away carrying the garments, her nose held high in the air, and her head shaking, murmuring that Mr. Saltire was good enough for any London folk, with his uncle a real live lordship in the next county.

"I feel so dreadfully modern!" sighed Maisie, as the maid buttoned up a blue drill frock. "It is horrid to have my hair hanging down again, and it is not nearly so becoming.

"Maisie is simply bursting with conceit," Dora told Florence, "and all because that Saltire man thought she was grown up."

After supper Maisie went into the White Parlour and wrote a long letter to her father and mother, graphically detailing all the events of the day. She added, in a postscript, that she hoped they would let her "come out" at seventeen. "I do so long to be grown up," she said. "I will have a dress made like the white muslin, and wear it at a fancy ball. Do write to Mrs. King and say it did not matter

inviting Mr. Saltire to tea, she seems so very upset about it. Poor Dora is very tired and stiff, and I think we had better sell Bell, as he's certainly not safe for any of us to ride," and folding her letter into an envelope, she addressed it in a bold round hand.

The others were playing in the gallery at the top of the house, which ran the whole length of the north front. It was a panelled room with a beautiful ceiling. Long rooms, such as this one, are often found in old houses, and were probably used for exercise and recreation when winter made the roads impassable.

Maisie was wanted for a fourth at Badminton, and later on enjoyed half-an-hour of the more juvenile sport called "blindman's-buff," quite forgetting her aspirations after maturity and the joys of a ball-gown.

But the play was somewhat exhausting for a summer's night, and they all found themselves panting and breathless when bed-time came.

"I'm simply boiling," said Dora; "let us go and get cool on one of the towers—the east one for choice."

"But the staircase up to it is dark," cried Florence, shrinking from the suggestion. The

evening they played "ghost" gave her a dread of moonlight adventures.

"Never mind the dark," said Rainald, "I'll help you. Just catch hold of my coat, and take care not to slip."

He led the way fearlessly, although it was a narrow ascent, and by no means easy at night-time.

"Look out, girls, and mind you don't fall. These steps are nothing but a ladder, and we don't want King scolding over broken legs," he called back.

At last they reached the summit, and were greeted by a rush of cool air. The harvest moon had not waned, and the gardens bathed in pale light looked beautiful indeed.

"You will see, ladies," said Rainald, taking the tone of a guide, and pointing across the landscape, "that the view from the east tower is a very fine and extensive one. In a clear day the three spires of Coventry can be distinguished. Sixpence extra is charged for mounting the tower, and any lady who refuses to pay will be left here until the morning. I will now pass the hat round."

"I have no money with me," said Maisie, entering at once into the game, and replying like a miserly tourist.

"Nor I, nor I," retorted Dora and Florence, shaking their heads.

"Then I fear you will all have to stay up here on the east tower till daybreak tomorrow morning," replied Rainald, in his capacity as guide.

"As bad as being up on the big wheel at Earl's Court, only we sha'n't get £5 compensation!" declared Dora.

"Very sorry, ma'am, but it's been the rule of Castleton from the days of Mistress Sarah, and not only in the summer months when the nights are warm but in the winter too. Many sightseers have perished with cold before now sooner than pay the extra sixpence. It's a little catch. We don't tell them before they go up, purposely. You see we get so few people, it would not pay us to be honest."

"A nice confession, truly ; but I really don't mind," replied Maisie. "I thought I should never get cool again, and the air up here is delicious."

"So glad you enjoy it" answered the guide, edging to the door. "Just let me know if in an hour or two you change your minds. There are electric bells and speaking-tubes laid on to the tower, and light refreshments can be served at very moderate prices." And,

with a laugh, Rainald slipped through the door, and held it tight on the other side.

Maisie, seeing that Florence was getting frightened, seized the handle and pulled with all her might.

"I say, Rainald, Rainald," she called, "don't humbug, there's a good boy!"

The door gave way a little as Dora joined her efforts to Maisie's; but her wrists were stiff from the ride, and had hardly any strength left in them. Then the door was sharply drawn to again and bolted, with a shout of triumph from the other side.

They heard Rainald run quickly to the steps, still laughing, and descend the ladder-like staircase. Here he evidently slipped, for the footfalls suddenly ceased half-way, and there was the sound of a thud at the bottom, as of some one having fallen.

The girls exchanged glances.

"I hope he hasn't hurt himself," said Maisie.

"Serve him right for being so horrid!" answered Dora, who did not half like the feeling of being locked up on the top of a tower at night.

"He would have called out if he had hurt himself," said Florence, "but Rainald never does hurt himself; he is as hard as iron. I

didn't think he would really go away and leave us." And then she added, with a little tremor in her voice, "Oh, do you suppose he will come back soon?"

"Sure to!" replied Maisie consolingly. "Cheer up, Florence, it's only a joke. He must think we are babies if he imagines this sort of joke will frighten *us*!"

Maisie said this confidently to try and banish the child's alarms, and glanced at Dora meaningly to signify that Florence must not be allowed to get frightened.

Secretly, both the sisters felt rather uncomfortable at the remembrance of the fall, and were surprised that Rainald did not at once return. A joke in moderation is all very well, but Rainald had no right to carry it so far.

"Let us call him," said Florence, after a while, "I—I don't like being up here like this at all, and I'll never forgive him if he doesn't come soon."

So they banged on the door and shouted lustily—

"Rainald, Rainald, *will* you let us out!"

But no answer came.

"The servants won't think of looking for us up here. It's the first time we have been on the tower in the evening," said Dora. "I

used to think Rainald rather a nice boy ; now I know him to be utterly heartless and abominable !”

“ Well, he really has left us long enough,” Maisie answered with increasing displeasure, “ and it seems no good calling, we can’t make anybody hear. I wish there were really electric-bells and telephones ! I dare say it is only a minute or two, but it feels like hours—years—since he went away.”

“ I’m so tired,” said Dora. “ I want to go to bed, and have a hot bath. Not only my arms are stiff, but my neck and shoulders feel quite strained, and I’m getting cross !”

“ I’m so angry,” said Maisie. “ I want to inflict an injury on that wretched boy.”

“ And I’m so frightened,” chimed in Florence. “ I want to scream !”

“ What good would that do ?” replied Dora. “ Your little voice couldn’t be heard through these great thick walls, and then it would be such a score for Rainald ! He *daren’t* leave us much longer, surely !”

“ Suppose,” suggested Maisie, “ we were to start singing as loud as ever we can, some song we all know. Then, if the servants did hear, they’d come to know why we were up here, instead of being in bed !”

"Not a bad idea! If Rainald heard, he would think we did not mind, and then it wouldn't be any more fun, and he'd come and let us out at once"—so said practical Dora.

"Shall we have that old plantation thing: 'Darkies, let us sing a song?'" suggested Florence.

"All right. Now begin! Dora, you are in the wrong key."

"Never mind, my voice is higher than yours, and it makes more noise."

"Blow the big bassoon, to disturb the whole creation," they shouted, with all the power of their lungs. "Wake old Massa up in bed, and make him blink his eye."

The voices in their shrill discord penetrated even the massive walls of the east tower, and guided Mrs. King to the spot. She had been hunting frantically for the missing children for the last hour and a half, and, believing them to be in the garden, had sent the men-servants to look, while she, accompanied by Mary, made a tour of the many rooms.

"Lor'!" she cried, "whatever is that noise?"

"Singing," replied Mary, "or something very like it."

A sigh of thankfulness escaped Mrs. King.

"Then they can't have come to any harm. I was afraid they had fallen down a trap door, or hidden themselves in a chest, like that horrid story of Ginevra. You can never tell what my young ladies be up to next, they're that high spirited!"

Mrs. King hurried to the foot of the steep stair, but a sudden fear seized her as she caught sight of something on the ground.

"Why, it's Master Rainald," she cried, bending over the prostrate figure in alarm. As she did so the boy stirred, and the singing overhead swelled out louder and louder —

"Shine, shine, moon,
While I dance with Dinah dear ;
Bright, bright moon,
Kiss her so no one can hear !"

"Oh, Master Rainald," cried poor King, "what's the matter? Are you hurt?"

He sat up and put his hand to his head.

"My word," he cried, "just feel that bump."

King felt it, and gave way to expressions of great alarm.

"How did you come by it, sir?"

"I don't remember. Oh, yes, I do know now. I was running down that ladder, and my foot caught on something. I fell on my

head, I suppose, and stunned myself. How long have I been here? Is it the morning?"

"Morning? No fear. But you have had a nasty tumble, sir, and if you don't mind standing up and seeing that no bones are broken I shall be obliged to you."

Rainald got on his feet somehow, horrified at such a suggestion.

"Nothing is broken, but I feel rather dizzy, and my head hurts—oh, and my shins too. I bet all the skin is grazed off them; and just look at these bruises on my arm."

"What are the young ladies doing up there? Didn't they hear you fall?"

"They don't seem to have taken much notice of it if they did. Good gracious! I forgot. *I locked them in!*"

The singing stopped suddenly, as if from sheer exhaustion or despair, and again the girls began knocking loudly on the bolted door, crying: "Let us out! Let us out! Rainald, Rainald, you *must* let us out!"

He rushed to the steps despite King's protestations, who, seeing him still pale and shaken from his fall, feared he might turn dizzy again.

He did not mount as quickly as before, and Mrs. King's portly figure scrambled up the

dangerous staircase after him in a state of great agitation.

"Here comes some one at last!" cried the voices from the tower. "Hurrah! release. Make haste to the rescue!"

Then the bolt was drawn sharply back, and Rainald stood before them.

Maisie flew at him, grasped him by the shoulders, and shook him, half laughing, half angry. She was really much relieved to see him safely back, and did not notice his pallor in the dark.

"I say, shut up!" he gasped, "my head won't stand it," and he made a feeble effort to struggle free.

"Where have you been all this time?" asked the girls.

"At the bottom of the stairs," he answered calmly.

"And you heard us calling, and never came? I wouldn't have believed it of you, Rainald."

"No, I didn't hear, that's just it! I fell on my head and knocked myself silly. I've only just come round, so for goodness' sake stop fighting and let's go to bed."

Maisie, who had got him now by the collar, suddenly loosened her hold. "I say, were you really hurt, or are you making it all up?"

"Ask King, here she is."

Mrs. King appeared upon the tower, hot and trembling. The children had tried to get her up there before, but failed, but now she had come of her own free will!

Wiping the perspiration from her brow, the poor old woman panted—

"You'll be the death of me, I know. Oh, what children you are! I thought you were lost for good and all this time. The men are still scouring the grounds, and who would have dreamt of looking on the tower? My poor heart is all of a flutter! What with finding Master Rainald insensible, and you young ladies locked up here, without so much as a covering on your heads; well, it's enough to try a body!"

"I think *we* are the people to be pitied," said Maisie. "I never enjoyed myself less, I can assure you. Half the time I was wondering if Rainald was killed, and if we were singing plantation songs over his dead body."

They descended carefully, helping the stout Mrs. King, who stuck half way, and declared she could go no farther.

"It's quite easy, if you don't hurry," Maisie assured her; "and I'm below to catch you if you fall."

The words brought a titter of smothered amusement from the others, for the idea of Maisie's lightly built figure catching the heavy King was ludicrous in the extreme.

Once on firm ground again, the housekeeper marched Rainald off to bed, and applied remedies to the bump of which he was getting quite proud.

As the girls followed to wish him good-night, Dora said: "How long would you have left us up there if you had not stunned yourself?"

"Only a few minutes; I was going down to fetch the 'light refreshments,' a tin of biscuits and some lemonade."

"It's been quite a day of adventures, and I really don't wonder we are a bother to poor King," remarked Maisie thoughtfully.

"I think she likes it," whispered Florence. "It gives her something to scold about, and to talk of to Mrs. Wimple."

"It's a queer taste," replied Maisie, "but I don't believe you are far wrong, for King is the kindest old soul if only you don't ruffle her *too* much!"



CHAPTER VII

MAISIE MAKES AMENDS

THE following day Maisie ordered the victoria, and announced her intention of driving to Barton House to apologise to Mrs. Weston for having made use of the heirlooms.

"Won't you come with me, Dora?" she said.

"Rather not! I should be much too shy, and you'll carry it off better alone. She can't be very angry if you go in all by yourself—looking frightened. Put on your shortest frock, and dress as childishly as ever you can, to make some excuse for our ignorance and imbecility. Of course, we ought to have known real old things and good embroidery. It only shows how our intellects are governed by outside influences."

"Goodness, what grand language!"

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Maisie was soon equipped in her childish garb, which, though she was tall, suited her. For being well-proportioned, and extremely supple, her height never made her awkward or ill at ease. Instead of stooping, she had rather a habit of tossing her head back, like an impatient pony. Her greatest charm was her lack of self-consciousness. She often told Dora she never remembered to be shy.

"To begin with," she would say, "it is so silly! Why should you be frightened of anybody? No one is going to hurt you."

And inwardly Dora, Florence, and Rainald admired Maisie's courage, as they watched her step into the victoria, and turn back to wave smilingly as the horses dashed away. Her hair was waving in the wind, looking very different from when Mr. Saltire had seen it, pinned to her head and powdered. She laughed to think of his surprise.

It was not a long drive, but as the carriage turned into the gates of Barton House, for the first time in her life Maisie felt a qualm of nervousness.

"Don't be so silly, Maisie," she told herself angrily, "you've got to do it, you can't draw back now. Oh! I hope they will be a long time answering the bell."

A very brief respite, and she found herself asking in a voice that sounded peculiarly thin and feeble—

“Is Mrs. Weston at home?”

“No, miss; she has just gone out driving—about five minutes ago.”

Maisie felt momentarily relieved, but then came the depressing thought that after screwing herself up to this point of bravery in order to make the apology, she would have to return the following day, and go through it all again.

“Is Mr. Weston in?” she inquired after a pause.

“Yes, miss.”

“Then, please ask if I may speak to him?”

A moment later she was following the servant through a large hall, in the centre of which stood a billiard table, looking like a small island.

Maisie began to feel insignificant and tongue-tied.

What should she say? Oh! what should she say?

A door was flung open, and this is what Maisie saw:

A low room, furnished like a study—with books and papers lying about in confusion—a large, open box of cigars on the writing-

table, and sporting pictures on the walls. Above the mantelpiece was a looking-glass, and balancing himself upon the fender, peering into the mirror, stood a man in a light morning suit, with a very unhappy expression on his face. In one hand he held a handkerchief, with the end screwed up lightly, and this he spasmodically poked into his eye, which was very red and bloodshot. He evidently had not noticed or heard the opening of the door.

"Miss Marsh!" announced the servant, and Maisie was left standing alone in the presence of the stranger.

He turned, and looked at her curiously, and somewhat shyly, she thought, for so tall a man. Instinctively, Maisie came forward.

"That's a very big gnat you've got in your eye," she said, without any conventional "How do you do?" "I can see it from here. I'm rather good at getting them out, so they say at home. I can generally do it the first shot. Shall I try?"

"I've been chasing the wretched thing round and round for half an hour," said the man distractedly, "but I am so clumsy. I *can't* get it out."

"I will," retorted Maisie. "Let me have the handkerchief."

She took it from him before he had time to answer, and twisted a fresh end deftly into a point with practised fingers.

"I generally use a hairpin," she said, "but I suppose there isn't such a thing in this room."

She glanced at an ash tray, as if half expecting to find the required implement there.

"No, I'm afraid not," said Mr. Weston, smiling in spite of his smarting eye.

"I can't reach up," cried Maisie, "but my boots aren't dirty," springing on a chair: "Now keep still," she commanded, "and don't flinch. He's on the eyeball now. I'll just get him into the corner, and then it will be quite easy. Would you mind winking once or twice? Ah! that's better; you've moved him! Steady, I can't do it if you waggle your head."

She put one hand on the stranger's shoulder, and with the other made a dash for his eye. A little gasp of triumph escaped her as she held up the handkerchief proudly, with the small but tormenting intruder upon the twisted end.

"I'm sure I'm exceedingly obliged to you," said Mr. Weston, as Maisie jumped down and handed him back his handkerchief. "You're awfully clever at it, I can see—had plenty of practice, eh?"

"Oh, yes. We always get our eyes full of them out bicycling."

"I was going round the garden on a bicycle just now. I suppose that is the reason one sees so many scorchers wearing goggles. But I'm afraid I was very rude as you came in. I didn't catch your name. May I ask?"

"Maisie—Maisie Marsh. We're living in your house—Castleton."

The mention of Castleton brought a pink flush of shame to her cheeks; she felt suddenly confused.

"I hope you like the old place?"

"We—we think it lovely."

Maisie looked down on the ground and toyed with her lanyard. She wished he had a fly in the other eye, to postpone her confession.

"I came," she continued, "to see Mrs. Weston, but as she was out—I—thought—you would do—instead——"

"Oh! something wrong at Castleton—the rain has come through the roof, or the boiler's burst."

"No, worse than that," said Maisie. "The roof or the boiler wouldn't have been my fault."

"I know, you have broken some of the wife's china," replied Mr. Weston, smiling his careless

smile, and looking at Maisie with genuine amusement. "Well, I'm sure she'll forgive you for the service you have rendered her inferior half this morning."

But Maisie shook her head.

"It's no good," she said; "you'll never guess. It was something so awful that I am almost afraid to tell you."

"Do I look a very formidable person?"

"But it *is* awful! You needn't laugh; Mrs. Wimple hasn't got over it yet."

"Oh, that old idiot! What's she doing at Castleton? I wasn't aware she was let with the house. You'll have no peace if you encourage her. Those sort of old servants are a regular plague, and the worst of it is, you can't shunt them. She drives me and my wife nearly crazy with her fussiness. Now, supposing I make your mind easy, and say that, whatever you've done, I won't mind?"

"Oh," cried Maisie, "that's too good and delightful of you! We made such a dreadful mistake about the clothes in the chest—those old relics."

Mr. Weston broke into a merry laugh.

"Why, of course! How stupid of me; I ought to have guessed at once. We had the whole story at dinner last night; Harry was

telling us. You, then, were the little girl in the red riding-habit?"

"No; that was Dora."

"Oh, there are more than two of you? Harry stayed to tea at Castleton, and he said there was one grown-up Miss Marsh, and one younger one. He thought the others were cousins."

As Mr. Weston spoke, Harry Saltire came whistling into the room, evidently quite unaware of the presence of a visitor.

He started, and stared at Maisie, not recognising her for the moment.

"Thank you, so much, for telling them about the clothes," she said, holding out her hand. "Mr. Weston is very kind; he is not angry after all."

"Really! and he is such a ferocious man!" replied Mr. Saltire, laughing. "But surely my eyes deceive me, and you are not the Miss Marsh I had the pleasure of meeting yesterday."

And he looked involuntarily from her hanging hair to the shortness of her skirt.

"I am, indeed, but then I was Mistress Sarah, you know, and that made all the difference."

Harry stood looking rather a fool, while a

certain mischievous twinkle came into Maisie's eyes.

"I am younger than you thought," she ventured, suppressing a smile.

"A good deal younger, please forgive my stupidity. Now I understand why you are not going to the county ball."

For a moment no one spoke. Then Harry broke the silence with an abrupt question—

"Do you like peaches?"

"Yes," replied Maisie demurely.

"We've got some ripping ones in the garden, they are just at their best now."

"The peaches at Castleton are failures," said Mr. Weston; "they never seem to do well there, so make the most of those at Barton, Miss Maisie; they want eating badly, I can tell you!"

"Come along," cried Harry, "I'll get a basket, you must take some back with you."

"For the youngsters?" she inquired.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid I put my foot in it yesterday, but you played the part so well, carried it off with such an air, it really was enough to hood-wink anybody."

Maisie thought she had never seen such

lovely peaches, and the lavish manner in which Mr. Saltire picked them, and filled the large basket, all but took her breath away.

"Are those really all for me?" she asked.

"Of course, if you will accept them. But perhaps I am sending coals to Newcastle, and Weston was libelling the Castleton trees."

"No, indeed, I don't know how to thank you."

"I'm so glad, please don't find out, for I hate being thanked for nothing--peaches are superfluous articles at Barton."

Maisie, standing at the foot of a small ladder which Harry Saltire had mounted, noticed that he talked more freely than the previous day, and seemed perfectly at his ease with her.

"After all," she thought, "youth has its advantages. I daresay when once I'm in long frocks I'll never be able to let myself really go again. It's like harness on a horse."

"I think I ought to go now," she said, when the basket was so full that the peaches toppled over and fell on the ground.

"Oh, don't hurry——"

"But the others will be expecting me; and just fancy, Mrs. King has such silly ideas; she was quite angry because we asked you to tea; but Mrs. Wimple stuck up for us, and said how

nice you were. I wrote and told mother ; she is quite different from Mrs. King. When Mrs. King is most horrified, mother generally laughs, and says that it doesn't really matter ; but Mrs. King is getting old, and we must try not to upset her."

"I am very sorry ; I suppose I ought not to have stayed to tea."

"Not at all. Mother will be very grateful when she hears how kind you were to Dora."

Maisie had turned towards the house, and Mr. Saltire, taking the basket from her, remarked—

"You must not go without saying goodbye to your stern landlord."

"Oh, no. Where is Mr. Weston?"

"Probably in the stables. That is the surest place to find him."

Harry was right. Mr. Weston, who had brought two polo ponies to Barton House for board and lodging, was standing, whip in hand, watching the saddling of the smaller.

"What a darling little bay !" cried Maisie.

"Yes, he is pretty to look at," replied Mr. Weston, "but no good for my purpose. All the training in the world will not make a polo player of him. He is only fit for a lady's hack. I am going to sell him."

"Who to?" asked Maisie.

"I don't know yet. I have not found a purchaser."

"Well, we want a new pony. Dora can't ride Bell again."

"Is Bell the pony I saw yesterday being taken back by your groom, Harry?"

"Yes."

"I was very struck with the look of him; and I hear," turning to Maisie, "he was a bit too much for your sister. He might suit me."

"Come and try him any time you like," she said delightedly. "I should feel so proud if I could tell father I had sold him. Perhaps you would let us buy this pony?"—laying her hand on the soft neck and patting it gently.

"Certainly, if he suits you, but you must surely consult your father first."

"But father would not ride him; he would only be for me and Dora." And she wrinkled up her forehead, trying to think what questions ought to be asked.

"Is he sound?"

Maisie ventured the remark timidly, for she was not quite sure what being sound meant, but she thought it was something to do with digestion.

An answer in the affirmative quite satisfied her. She did not think to ask the age or the price.

"Might I try his—his paces?" she asked. "Paces" seemed a good word; it came like an inspiration.

"Now?" queried Mr. Weston, glancing at her sailor dress.

"Yes. I might ride round the field; my skirt won't matter, there is no one to see."

She exhibited a fine disregard for Harry Saltire and Mr. Weston, who exchanged glances and smiled. Maisie's assurance and promptitude amused them immensely.

"Put on a side-saddle," said Mr. Weston to the groom, "and bring Boxer into the paddock."

Maisie waited impatiently, her cheeks flushed with excitement, till the pony came.

"Give me a leg up," she said to Harry, and a moment later was in the saddle.

She trotted and cantered, and finally set Boxer at some hurdles in the middle of the field, which he took splendidly. She looked very fearless and pretty in her white dress on the spirited pony.

"That girl is going to be a handful when she grows up," said Mr. Weston to Harry

Saltire. "What do you bet she buys the pony straight off, without consulting any one?"

"It seems highly probable," laughed Harry. "She seems the sort of child to act first and think afterwards. Of course, you won't let her have it till you hear from Mr. Marsh?"

"Rather not! I don't really know what children are coming to. I suppose they are advancing with the rest of civilisation, going ahead strong. Look how she sits the animal! It's a treat to watch her!"

Maisie was absolutely innocent of any such thought as "showing off." She was really eager to replace Bell, and thought it would be a very grand thing to find a substitute all by herself. "Father will be so pleased to be saved the trouble," she told herself. Then she turned Boxer's head in the direction of the gate and rode back to the two men.

"He is a perfect angel!" she cried breathlessly.

"Glad you like him," replied Mr. Weston.

"Yes, he will just suit us, for he has such a good mouth, and Dora's wrists are rather weak; she can't manage a pulling horse. How lucky you happened to say you wanted to sell him! You are sure you don't want him for any one else?"

"No; I don't think I've ever done a deal so easily and satisfactorily," replied Mr. Weston, with an underlying tone of amusement in his voice.

"Then, if you don't mind, I will just ride Boxer to the door, that Faulkner may look at him."

"Who is Faulkner?"

"Our coachman. I drove over."

Maisie rode ahead, and the two gentlemen followed.

"Faulkner," she called out, "do you like the look of this pony?"

"Why—yes, miss."

"Do you think he is a good one—as good as Bell?"

Again the coachman assented, looking rather puzzled.

"Then I will buy him," she said, jumping lightly to the ground.

"Thanks," replied Mr. Weston, laughing at the sudden look of amazement and distrust on Faulkner's face.

"He thinks we are 'doing' Miss Marsh," whispered Harry Saltire, with a chuckle.

"And," continued Maisie, "I will send Bell up for you to look at, he is exercised every morning. You can do what you like with him."

Father bought him at a horse show, the other day, and I am sure he is sound, because that is a question father always asks. I remember hearing it over and over again."

Then she shook hands with Mr. Weston with a grateful little smile, and said prettily : "It was so kind of you to forgive me about the clothes."

Harry Saltire helped her into the carriage. "Don't sit on the peaches," he cried.

"I've so enjoyed my visit, and I'm going to eat this topmost peach on the way home."

And Maisie waved her hand as she drove away. She was very hot and dishevelled from her ride. Her hat was crooked and her hair all awry, as she leaned back in the carriage and took a large bite out of a juicy peach. The visit had certainly been a successful one, and Boxer was sweet.

Then she suddenly remembered that she had bought the pony, and quite forgotten to ask the price. She stopped eating the peach.

She had acted first and thought afterwards.

CHAPTER VIII

A SCHEME IS HATCHED

DORA, Florence, and Rainald were waiting on the steps for Maisie when she got back from Barton.

"What an age you've been!" they cried.

Maisie alighted with her basket of peaches, and a triumphant little smile.

"I've had a lovely time," she said; "they were ever so good to me, and not the least angry. Mr. Saltire sent you the peaches; aren't they beauties? But, oh! I've done such a stupid thing!"

"What?" asked Dora, helping herself to fruit.

"I bought a pony, and never asked the price!"

"*Bought a pony!* Maisie, how could you?"

"It was instead of Bell. I don't know what I shall do if it turns out too expensive, and

father says he won't have it. How much money have we between us in the bank, Dora?"

"I'm not quite sure. But wasn't it a very odd thing for you to do, Maisie? Why, even mother would not buy a horse without consulting father."

"I didn't think. The pony was so pretty, and jumped beautifully. Perhaps Mr. Weston will buy Bell; I said he was for sale."

"But Bell is not yours either," cried Dora. "Father bought him."

"Oh, dear! It seems I've been doing the wrong thing all round. I meant it for the best."

Maisie looked quite upset.

"I think," she said, "I'll go and write to father; he will understand. After all, it only wants explaining."

Mr. Marsh's face was a study when he got the letter.

"Our little Maisie has been trying her hand at horse-dealing," he said, "but I am afraid she has not a very practical head for business. The description of the pony is not very convincing. She says he has brown eyes with long lashes, and 'a dear little body,' and 'such a soft neck.' Luckily I have a fuller account

and more details from Weston, who is not at all inclined to part with his pony until he hears from me. I must write to Faulkner about it. He knows exactly what we want, and I will tell him at the same time to sell Bell for whatever he can get. I won't have either of the children ride him again."

"I think we ought soon to go to Castleton," replied Mrs. Marsh, "and look after Maisie and Dora. They seem to be leading King a dance! Her letters are most agitating. She says they are so difficult to control."

"That's nonsense! Maisie and Dora are the easiest children in the world to manage if King would go about it in the right way. Besides, they know very well how to take care of themselves, and will come to no harm."

"I believe you are right," said Mrs. Marsh, "but sometimes I feel anxious. I would not leave the children for a day, but for knowing how devoted King is to them."

When Maisie got her father's answer she skipped round the room with delight, a great weight lifted off her heart.

"He isn't a bit angry with me," she said, "and he has written to tell Faulkner what to do about buying Boxer."

Dora was sitting in a window seat sketch-

ing, and Rainald was peering over her shoulder criticising the work.

"Here comes old Mrs. Wimple up the drive," he cried presently. "Shall we call her in and give her some of our chocolates? We might get another story out of her."

"Can we do anything for you, Mrs. Wimple?" asked Dora, leaning out of the window. "Come in, won't you?"

"I came up to ask a little favour of you, Miss Marsh," began the old woman, speaking hesitatingly. "I want to know if you'd have any objection to my picking a few flowers out of the garden?"

"You see," continued Mrs. Wimple, "it's been a custom in the family ever since Mr. Eustace Weston died, about fifty years ago, to put a little floral token on his tomb when the anniversary comes round, because 'e was one of the best loved and most popular gentlemen as ever lived at Castleton."

"Really! What did he do?"

"Everything that a real gentleman can do to make 'isself respected and regretted. You can read about 'im in the book of Castleton. It was then that this ancient 'ouse in all its glory did become a centre of activity."

Mrs. Wimple's eyes brightened as she mur-

mured the words "in all its glory," and she stretched out her withered hands as if to embrace the ghosts of the past.

"'E lived the ideal life of a country gentleman, so we are told," she went on, "and with 'is talented wife, rendered 'is 'ome the most attractive and 'ospitable one in the neighbourhood. Aye, and there's another anniversary coming in a day or two—one that all the descendants of Eustace Weston would do well to remember, and to commemorate, instead of giving over the old place to a furnished let. How can one expect strangers to care about such things? But there, Mr. Richard Weston, the present owner, 'e thinks more of 'is 'orses than of 'is ancestors, which is a pity. It ain't good feeling for him to forget this anniversary what's coming in two days, and the farmers will be disappointed. They knows the story well, and looks for a return."

"What is the story?"

"It's a tale of what the farmers did—the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of the present tenants. An' it just shows Mr. Eustace Weston's popularity."

"Go on," cried the children impatiently.

"Well, me dears, Mr. Eustace's tenant at Castleton Hill died, and the farm was thrown

on 'is 'ands, quite sudden like and unexpected. 'E'd disposed of all his farming stock, poor gentleman, and was quite put about to know how to cultivate the land for the season. He never felt at such a loss, and on mentioning 'is difficulty, casual like, to one or two neighbouring farmers, they offered, if he would provide seed-corn, and bread, cheese, and beer, to give 'im a 'love haul.' The 6th of April was fixed, and on the morning of that day Mr. Eustace Weston went up the hill to see the men at work, when, lo and be'old a wonderful—aye! an amazing sight met his view! If you'll believe me, my dears, there were no less than sixty-eight ploughs, ten of 'em double ones, at work, honour bright! And the horses were decked out in ribbons, and the men, they wore clean smock frocks and smilin' faces. It was a scene of a most animated appearance—one what regularly took the master's breath away. It resembled almost a mighty fair. One 'undred acres was ploughed, 'arrowed, and nearly sown in that one day, and the only regret expressed was that more farmers 'ad not 'eard of the proposal."

"But," cried Rainald, "if the seed was sown in April how can the anniversary be this week?"

"Now you think you've caught me tripping, don't you, sir?" replied Mrs. Wimple, with a knowing shake of her lilac bonnet. "The fact is, the celebration of the event 'as always took place on Mr. Eustace's birthday, it being usually an outdoor affair or a harvest ball in the barn."

"A harvest ball," cried Maisie, "in the barn here? Oh, what fun it must have been! Let us give one in memory of Eustace Weston. We've only two days to get it up, and we must tell all the people that it is *quite* an impromptu affair!"

The others looked at Maisie, half-awed, and yet taken with the suggestion. Maisie had such brilliant ideas, such startling propositions. Her enthusiasm was infectious; they felt themselves suddenly bitten with the desire for a harvest ball in the great barn of Castleton. Even Mrs. Wimple's face lightened.

"What's impromptu?" she asked incredulously, as if half-fearing it meant something dreadful.

"Oh! got up all in a hurry—nothing formal about it," explained Maisie. "You can tell us who to ask, Mrs. Wimple. We can manage everything beautifully. I've all sorts of ideas. What do you say—are you all game for it?"

"Rather!" they cried, one after the other, made courageous by Maisie's undaunted spirit.

"But *may* you, without a 'by your leave' from Mrs. King?" asked Mrs. Wimple, astonished.

"Of course we may. We can do just whatever we like—it's holidays!" Maisie said, "it's holidays," with her most convincing smile, as if that fact alone swept away all argument and covered every shred of doubt or possible blame hereafter.

"What about food?" said Dora.

"Oh! we'll get Mrs. Wimple to tell us where we can order a lot of cakes; that is what mother does when she is giving a district tea. Then we will let cook into the secret, and get her to make us some things, and on the night we'll send a huge card of invitation to Mrs. King, and Dora shall sketch a lot of people dancing on it, and we'll write 'in honour of Eustace Weston's birthday.'"

Each had a fresh suggestion to make, till Mrs. Wimple's head began to swim, and she declared herself "all of a tremble with excitement."

"We must make it a huge success," said Dora. "Suppose, Mrs. Wimple, you give us a list of names now—the names of all the

people we ought to ask—and then we can send out the invitations.”

Mrs. Wimple, carried away by delight at the prospect of a festivity, lent her aid gleefully. And all that afternoon the girls talked in whispers, and moved about the house with mysterious faces.

But the all-important move was to get Cook on their side, for it seemed there was no shop at hand where cakes could be bought in any quantity.

Maisie awaited her opportunity, and evading Sarah, the scullery-maid, drew Cook into a remote corner of the large kitchen and broached the subject cautiously. Cook listened, a frown furrowing her flat forehead, and a look of disapproval gathering all over her that boded ill for the harvest ball.

“Give a party with the missus away—what are you thinking of, Miss Maisie? Why, I never heard of such a thing!”

“Then you won’t help? You really would stop it all without feeling the least sorry for the disappointed people?” asked Maisie.

“Yes,” replied Cook; “if your mother was here, miss, it would be different. You don’t think of the lot those farmers eat.”

“Oh! yes I do, and that is the very reason

I came to you. I did not imagine you would be so unsympathetic. But never mind, it doesn't matter," and Maisie left the kitchen.

She found the others in an arbour, Florence reading, and Dora and Rainald mending a catapult.

Maisie entered, her face slightly flushed, her head thrown back.

"What news?" asked Florence, looking up. "Have you had your usual good luck?"

"No. Cook won't help."

"But she *must*!" cried Dora.

"There is no 'must' about it. She won't. But we've asked all the people, and we can't draw back now. Think how disappointed they would be, besides making us look such frauds. I've started this thing now, and I mean to carry it through. Of course, there will be difficulties, but that only makes it more exciting. Cook is our first stumbling-block!"

"Will she tell Mrs. King?" asked Rainald.

"No, I think not. She imagines it is all off. She never dreams that we could do it without her help."

"I'm afraid Cook is on the top rail," sighed Dora.

"Think so?" queried Maisie with an assured little smile.

"But what can you do?" asked Florence, mystified.

"Well, there is always a way out of a difficulty if you think long enough. I want to beat the supper Cook would have made us into fits, I want it to be a lovely ball, I want——"

"Oh! do come to the point," cried the others impatiently, "you are keeping us on tenter hooks."

Maisie, who had been standing in the doorway, walked suddenly into their midst, perched herself on a garden table, and lowered her voice to a whisper, as one who schemes a conspiracy.

"I'm going to send a telegram to our London confectioners. They know us so well there. Mother gets heaps of things. I shall say something of this sort."

She drew a pencil from her pocket and scribbled on half a sheet of paper—

"Send enough food for a farmer's ball on Thursday night for —— people."

"I do not know how many are coming yet, but I shall find that out from Mrs. Wimple, and fill in the space. I think I shall add: 'I want a nice supper,' that is only five more words."

"But," said Florence, surprised at her

cousin's daring, "you won't be able to pay for the food when it comes."

"Mother has a bill at Sweetem's, it can go down in that."

"But won't your mater be awfully wild?" asked Rainald, looking with great admiration at Maisie.

"I am sure she would like us to have it. She said we were to enjoy ourselves, and she always tells us to be nice to those sort of people."

As Maisie spoke she tossed her head a little indignantly.

"Of course I wouldn't do it in a sneaky way. Of course I shouldn't send the telegram unless I *knew* mother would be glad. But in case I am wrong, I have quite money enough in the bank to pay for it myself—money, you know, that I have saved, and which is quite my own to do as I like with. Father always said I could take it out and spend it when I wanted something very, very much. I want this more than anything in the world, and there can't be any harm if I pay for it myself."

"No—o," said Rainald, still hesitating.

"You see, that makes it quite straight," explained Maisie. "Don't you like the idea immensely?"

"It is perfectly splendid!" cried Dora, enraptured. "But I hope the things will come in time."

"Well, if they don't we shall have to put the ball off for a night. I am so glad it is old Eustace Weston's birthday; we should never have thought of the ball but for him!"

"There will be a lot to do," said Florence. "Let's go and look at the barn."

"I've told one of the stable boys to sweep it out," said Maisie; "it is the quaintest old place possible."

They inspected the scene of the coming festivities with a thrill of suppressed excitement.

"Maisie and Rainald must open the ball," said Florence. "But what are we to do for music?"

"Mrs. Wimple says she can procure some village musicians—it will be rather fun to see what the local talent is like."

There was a balcony at one end of the barn, with a steep flight of steps up to it.

"The band," said Maisie, pointing upwards, "will play there. How can we decorate the room?"

Each had some fresh suggestion to make, and presently Maisie, having set them all to

work on different tasks, went in search of Mrs. Wimple.

Having found out the number of guests expected, and being assured most emphatically that none would decline, she sprang on her bicycle and wheeled away at full speed to the telegraph office. The day was hot and the roads dusty, but Maisie did not care. On the way she met Mr. Saltire, who was also bicycling.

"May I ride with you?" he asked.

"Certainly," cried Maisie, "if you don't mind the pace. I'm in a good deal of a hurry."

He laughed, amused that she should think he could not keep up with her.

"I—I think I can manage it," he replied, pretending to gasp very breathlessly.

Maisie saw he was making fun of her, and joined in the laugh against herself.

Then, as they spun along, she confided her plans about the ball.

"I am quite sure mother will like us to give it," she said; "only it's rather anxious work getting the whole thing up ourselves, without even Mrs. King knowing."

"Can I help towards the repast by sending a hamper of peaches?"

"How lovely! Will you really? Are you quite sure you can spare them?"



"May I ride with you?" he asked.

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"Quite sure. You are most welcome to them!"

"And you might tell Mr. Weston about its being Eustace Weston's birthday. He will like to think the people are not disappointed, and that the anniversary is to be kept. I daresay he and Mrs. Weston are quite worrying over being away, and of course they could not have given the harvest ball with us at Castleton."

"I will certainly relieve their minds on that point," answered Mr. Saltire gravely, although he remembered that Dick had alluded to the anniversary the previous evening as "one of old Wimple's fads," and that he had added, "thank goodness we are out of it this year!"

Maisie despatched her telegram after showing it to her companion to make sure that it was spelt right.

"Where have you been, Miss Maisie?" asked Mrs. King as Maisie came in breathless.

"For a bicycle ride."

"You look over-heated; this weather's enough to give you a sunstroke. Your papa was most particular to tell me not to let you do it."

But Maisie flung her arms round the old housekeeper's neck, and the impulsive hug

smoothed her ruffled feathers, though it dishevelled her grey locks.

“Yes, King, I’m incorrigible ; but I’m going to be much worse—I’m going to do all sorts of things, so prepare yourself for shocks !”

And with this startling assertion Maisie skipped away.

CHAPTER IX

THE PLOT

MRS. KING came hurrying through the garden in a great state of fluster, a telegram in her hand. It was addressed to "Marsh," and she had scruples in opening it.

"Miss Maisie," she called, "Miss Maisie. Here is a telegram, and eighteenpence to pay."

"Ah," said Maisie, taking it from her, and sidling away that she might not see the contents, "I was half expecting this."

Mrs. King watched her open the yellow envelope, and saw that her eyes brightened. The housekeeper's curiosity was aroused; she waited for an explanation, but Maisie gave none. She simply pocketed the telegram, and saying, "There is no answer," strolled away.

"What's up?" muttered Mrs. King suspiciously. "It ain't customary for her to be

receiving telegrams, and not telling a body about it, just as if she was a grown-up lady. It looks queer, and I don't like it."

The housekeeper returned to her apartments meditating. She did not like to insist on seeing the message, but at the same time she felt uncomfortable.

Maisie ran in search of Dora and the cousins, and they saw by her manner she had news.

"It's a telegram from Sweetem's," she said. "We are to send a cart to meet the afternoon train. I'll go at once and order it, and won't Mrs. King be astonished when the things arrive!"

The marvellous part was, that so far Mrs. King had not heard of it. There were suspicions, evidently, among the stable men, and some of the other servants, but King was very exclusive, and always sat apart, so she knew nothing of the current rumours.

"We had better tell her before our supper actually arrives," said Maisie. "We will wait till the cart is on its return journey from the station, and then take her the invitation!" The card was a huge one, and the letters printed most imposingly, Dora having spent half the night over it. Maisie held up Dora's masterpiece for her cousin's inspection.

In one corner was a clever sketch of Mrs. King dancing with a yokel in a smock, the dance being "up the middle and down again," and at the back, skilfully etched, was a refreshment buffet.

"Ripping!" said Rainald. "I did not know Dora was so clever. Those figures have such life and movement in them."

"Oh! yes," replied Maisie, "Dora's awfully clever in that way; her drawing-master prophesies a great future for her."

They put the card in a large envelope, and carried it with great pomp on a salver to Mrs. King's room.

"A letter for you, by special delivery," said Dora, bowing low.

The others stood back, suppressing their laughter.

Mrs. King, thinking it some joke, adjusted her glasses, and broke the seal. She read—

Mr. Eustace Weston
Requests the pleasure of
Mrs. King's
Company to a harvest ball.
The Great Barn of Castleton. R.S.V.P.

He stared at the card uncomprehendingly.
Who is Eustace Weston? What ball?"

she asked. "I don't understand. Perhaps, Miss Maisie, you will explain."

"My good King, it is as simple as daylight. This is Eustace Weston's birthday, therefore it is Eustace Weston's party, though he won't be there unfortunately, since he has been dead for nearly fifty years."

"A party! I've heard nothing of a party."

"No; we wanted to surprise you. There is going to be a ball to-night in the barn. We've invited all the neighbouring farmers, and ordered the supper from town, so that you should have no trouble."

For a moment Mrs. King seemed hardly able to believe her ears; but for the recollection of the telegram and Maisie's mysterious air, she would have thought they were making fun at her.

"You—you've *dared* to do this?" she asked in an awful voice that froze the children's blood. "You have had the audacity to invite these—these farmer people—to Castleton—in the absence of your parents, and without permission?"

Maisie felt her spirits sinking, her courage ebbing away. The others came closer, as if to support their ringleader in "the Plot."

"And you have actually ordered a supper from London!" continued Mrs. King in thrilling accents, her cap waggling with rage.

Maisie nodded. She had never seen Mrs. King so genuinely angry, never before heard her voice vibrate as it did now.

Maisie cleared her throat, which had grown dry and painful.

"This, then, is the finishing stroke!" continued their accuser. "This shows that I am powerless to control you. Thank goodness that——"

But she checked herself, and left the girls wondering what she was going to say.

A footman came to the door. He, too, looked agitated.

"If you please, Mrs. King, there is a cart come from the station, and a man who says he has brought the things that were ordered from Sweetem's for the ball."

The housekeeper flung up her hands.

"Oh! what *will* the mistress say? Oh, you wicked children. How could you have done it—how could you?"

She hurried out with a great rustling of skirts, and greeted the man from Sweetem's as if he were a dynamiter.

"But it was ordered, ma'am," he replied

astonished, and somewhat taken aback by Mrs. King's hysterical indignation.

"Yes," said Maisie, advancing. She was calm now, with the awful calm of despair. "This lady," pointing to Mrs. King, "is rather excited. You must excuse her. Will you help us unpack the things in the barn?"

She slipped a coin into his hand, and explaining that it would be all right, led the way.

Mrs. King followed.

"What is done, cannot be undone," said Dora. "We really want you to come and dance, and enjoy yourself, Mrs. King."

"Me dance!" she almost shrieked. "*Me* countenance such proceedings! No, Miss Dora, not likely. I wash my hands of the matter. I protest."

"Oh, don't protest any more, you're spoiling everything! We were so happy about it, and now you are making it all quite unpleasant and stormy," Dora remonstrated.

"What do you think it will cost your mamma?" asked Mrs. King severely.

"I don't know, I couldn't say."

"No more could I—I should be *afraid* to say!"

"Do you think mother will mind? Because Maisie could pay it herself."

"Mind ! . Who would not ? Throwing money away on a set of people we know nothing of, people who may be robbers or burglars, or——"

"Oh, no, there you exaggerate the evils. Mrs. Wimple knows all the guests personally."

"Oh ! so she's in it, is she ? said King fiercely. "It seems I've been kept in the dark all round."

"Only because we knew you would make difficulties."

"There wouldn't have been a ball if I'd got wind of it, that's sure and simple. Look at the food—look at it, I say—fit to set before the gentry of the whole neighbourhood ! Now, young man," addressing the stranger, "when you've done unpacking, I'll thank you to go."

So she continued scolding and fuming, while the girls, growing gradually accustomed to the sound, cheered up and got quite merry again over the preparations.

"And all these peaches, too !" said Mrs. King. "You can't get peaches for nothing."

"Can't you ?" said Maisie, laughing, as she inspected the Barton hamper.

The barn was fast attaining an air of festivity which it had long lacked. Rainald grew hilarious. He even asked Mrs. King to

practise "Sir Roger," and began waltzing with Dora, to an accompaniment on the comb.

"You must not frivol, you must help," said Maisie. "There is no end to be done before we shall be ready."

When Mrs. King finally returned to the house, worn out with expostulating, she sank into a chair, and ordered Mary to bring her a strong cup of tea.

"I'm that upset," she said, "I don't know what to do; but there's retribution coming, and it's a strange chance they should have hit on to-night, of all nights, for their ball, as they call it! It seems quite providential that Mr. and Mrs. Marsh took it into their heads they'd like to surprise them. My word! it will be a surprise!"

As the day closed in, and the barn stood ready to receive the guests, the girls' excitement grew intense.

"We must wear our best frocks, our smartest of all," declared Dora and Florence.

"Of course, and receive the people, just as mother does at her receptions."

"I hope we've thought of everything."

"I believe so," said Maisie, wrinkling her forehead. "I crept up just now very softly to King's room, and spread out her best violet

silk dress, as a hint that she might wear it and come to the ball, and laid one of my fans beside it—the little blue fan with the spangles.”

But no Mrs. King appeared to rejoice their hearts in her violet silk.

“The guests will be here directly, and Mrs. Wimple is already in the barn ; we had better go,” cried Maisie.

The village band had mounted to the balcony and was tuning up, and the guests were beginning to arrive. They beamed on their young hostesses, who welcomed them with friendly handshakes.

Suddenly Maisie, whose eyes had been resting with quiet satisfaction on the refreshment table, turned pale, rushed across to where Dora was standing, and began eagerly speaking in an undertone.

“Oh, dear, oh, dear! what shall I do? We thought of the food, the fruit, and the flowers, but we never remembered to get anything to *drink!*”

Dora's face blanched with horror.

“Then it's spoilt,” she said, “the whole thing is spoilt! Our ball will be a failure. How could we have forgotten such an important item? Oh, Maisie! what shall we do?”

Maisie, seeing tears of vexation welling up

into her sister's eyes, with a dash of her old spirit, which even Mrs. King's anger could not quell, hastened to console her.

"Don't cry, Dora, it will be all right, it *shall* be all right," she added, setting her teeth firmly.

"I'm not going to be done now, I——"

"But what can you do?"

"Why, of course, there must be plenty of things to drink indoors. Farmers are supposed to like beer—aren't they? Well, there is a lot of beer, I know; the servants have only to set to work to draw it off into jugs. Then there is a lot of lemonade in the cellar. Come along, Dora, and back me up. Mrs. King must give us the key."

"I say, where are you off to?" cried Rainald.
"This is our dance, Maisie."

"Don't stop me," she answered, pushing breathlessly past him. "I'm going to fetch some drinks!"

Then it dawned on Rainald suddenly that this part of the entertainment had been forgotten.

"Stay and keep things going, Rainald," said Dora, "and tell Florence; only for goodness' sake don't look as if anything dreadful had happened."

The sisters met Mrs. King in the hall, and immediately made known their demands.

"Well, things have come to a pretty pass when you think I'm going to give up the cellar key for the whole of the neighbourhood to get drunk on!" said Mrs. King, flabbergasted. In calmer moments she would have used a longer word—"inebriated"—but this was no time for picking or choosing sentences. "It's a very good thing that nothing is provided, perhaps it will teach them not to accept invitations from children, and pay Mrs. Wimple out for her wickedness in encouraging such proceedings," continued the angry housekeeper. "You can have as much water as you like, and plain wholesome cold water is good enough for any one."

"Now you are talking nonsense, King. You know as well as I do that water is not drunk at balls."

"Well, I shall not allow the cellar to be opened," retorted Mrs. King. "I must do my duty. I am in charge of this house, and of you; and I refuse to give up the master's cellar key."

"What shall we do?" gasped Dora.

Maisie dropped into a chair limply.

"I'm done!" she said. "Dora, we've failed!"

Just as these tragic events were being

enacted at Castleton, Mr. and Mrs. Marsh were driving up the hill on their way home.

"I wonder what the children are doing," said Mrs. Marsh. "It will be such fun surprising them."

"I hope they won't have gone to bed," replied their father cheerily. "Look, now you can see Castleton by moonlight. What a picture it makes!"

"Lovely!" said Mrs. Marsh. "I wish it belonged to us."

As they turned in at the gates they saw the lights in the barn, and heard the sound of music.

"What is going on?" cried Mr. Marsh, leaning out of the window.

Maisie and Dora, hearing the sound of wheels, ran to the door.

"It is some late comers, and they are driving," said Maisie. "Oh! how dreadful; more thirsty people to put us to shame."

"Why, it is our own carriage," exclaimed Dora, "and has not stopped at the barn."

A moment later, and the two excited children rushed into their parents' arms.

"Oh! I'm so *thankful* you've come!" cried Maisie, dancing on the doorstep with delight, and dragging her father into the hall. "We

were at our wits' end to know what to do. You're just in time—hurrah!”

“But what's all this excitement?” he asked, pointing towards the barn, and kissing the flushed cheeks of his two breathless daughters.

“Why, our harvest ball! All the people were going to be disappointed because the Westons were away. We felt certain you would like us to give it, so we got up the whole thing in two days. Mrs. King knew nothing about it till this afternoon, and she's simply wild. We have never made her so angry before, never in all our lives. Do come and tell her you don't mind, and make her go out and dance. Oh, mother, was it such a dreadful thing to do?”

“Well,” replied Mrs. Marsh, laughing, “I suppose it was from King's point of view. But I've no doubt you've had scolding enough to make you less enterprising for the future, and I'm too pleased at seeing my chicks again to be angry to-night, so we'll see about that in the morning.”

“Darling mother,” cried Maisie and Dora, clinging to her.

“Tell me,” continued Mrs. Marsh, “is there food enough for everybody?”

Her hospitable nature thought of this at once.

"Plenty of food, but *no* drink! We quite forgot it! Father, you must tell Mrs. King to give up the cellar key, she has absolutely refused so far!"

"Well, I call this a great joke to come back on an impromptu party," he said, genuinely amused.

Just then, Mrs. King appeared, curtsying and apologising, and gasping out the tale of the supper agitatedly.

"I am only so glad there is enough for everybody," replied Mrs. Marsh. "Let all the servants go out and enjoy themselves, and perhaps you would like to join in the festivities, too? Mr. Marsh will give orders about the drinks to James, and we will come ourselves presently to tell the people they are welcome."

Poor King's relief was so great at the way the news had been received, that for the moment she was speechless, but she looked her gratitude as she withdrew.

"You must come in just as you are, mother dear!" said Maisie, "and won't Rainald and Florence be surprised?"

So Rainald's words came true, and Mrs. King, in the violet silk, struggled through a set of lancers, and appeared to thoroughly enjoy the exercise.

The advent of Mr. and Mrs. Marsh was greeted with great cheering from the company, and many were the graceful speeches and well-expressed words of thanks given by these homely farming people.

What seemed to impress them most was the fact that their entertainers were strangers, and could have no particular interest in the Castle-ton tenants.

"That's what I call real 'ospitality," muttered a burly farmer.

"Yes. Give me a furnished let," said Mrs. Wimple afterwards, "it beats anything!"

CHAPTER X

THE DAWN FOR DORA

THE happy days at Castleton slipped only too quickly away, but never in after years were they forgotten by any of the four children who made merry within those ancient walls.

They parted with Mrs. Wimple, sworn friends for life, while half the farmers in the neighbourhood, who had danced at the Harvest Ball, came up to wish them "Goodbye," bringing little offerings of fruit and flowers.

No wonder the Westons laughingly complained they had been quite cut out by their Castleton tenants.

"It is delightful to see how popular the children have made themselves with the people," said Mrs. Marsh to King the morning before they left.

"Ah! who could help loving them!" cried

that worthy dame, looking nevertheless ten years younger since freed from the responsibility of her charges. Yet she was not speaking hypocritically. "They are the best-hearted little souls in the world, and I wouldn't have 'em different, not for all the ease and peace of mind!"

But here she checked herself, for Maisie appeared on the scene with a bruised arm, and a torn frock, caused, she explained by a little accident in the garden.

"Dora and I wanted to make a toboggan, so we put the see-saw up against a high wall. I found a box big enough to sit in, and climbed to the top of the wall and slid down splendidly, of course jumping out before I got to the bottom to save the bump. But my dress caught on something the second time, and I fell on my arm, but Dora is getting on splendidly."

Mrs. Marsh, petrified at the idea, sent out to stop further experiments.

"Perhaps it is as well after all," she said, "that we are going back to London."

The Westons, who only cared for hunting, were so delighted at the success of their let, that they were glad enough the following year to repeat the experiment, and so it came to

pass that the dear old Warwickshire mansion became Maisie and Dora's regular summer haunt, a sort of second home.

Nothing very exciting happened after this till Maisie blossomed into society as a *débutante*, and then life began for her in real earnest.

Dora, who was two years younger, felt the loss of Maisie's perpetual companionship deeply.

It was so lonely to do lessons *tête-à-tête* with Miss Mayborne, and then prepare her work for the following day, while Maisie dressed for a ball.

Still, since Maisie's *début*, some fresh joys had come into Dora's existence. It was exciting to wake, and hear Maisie's enthusiastic accounts of the evening's adventures, for she was young, and everything being new, appeared delightful to her. She would describe the dresses minutely, and take off the different ladies of their acquaintance with such excellent mimicry that Dora laughed till the tears came into her eyes.

Maisie had grown into a really beautiful girl, and no one took more interest in her than Dora.

"Such a delightful ball!" cried Maisie one

night, seating herself on the foot of Dora's bed, and scattering hairpins on the coverlet as she uncoiled her curly tresses. "It was a very hot night, and lots of people were complaining, but I felt as jolly as possible, and danced the whole evening."

"Had you nice partners?"

"Yes," she replied decidedly, "I liked them all, but sometimes you came across such dreadfully *blasé* people, men who ask you to dance as if it were quite a favour on their part. They are generally very young, and look as if they would break in half."

"What fun!" chuckled Dora, quite appreciating the situation. "Who did you dance with most?"

"Harry Saltire, he was there, and he gave me his buttonhole."

Maisie pointed to a flower, pinned amongst the chiffon of her tasteful bodice, half hidden by the white frills.

"What's the good of it!" asked Dora, "you put it on where it didn't show, and the flower is faded quite brown."

"A souvenir," said Maisie. "Go to sleep, Dora, or you'll be too sleepy to get up in the morning, and there will be no excuse for your being late."

"I've got to practise half an hour before breakfast," groaned Dora, turning over and shaking her pillow into a comfortable shape.

So Dora, resigned to solitude, devoted herself to lessons and drawing. She had views of a future in which she should be a personage in the artistic world—the ambitious spirit so rife in the hearts of the young was like a consuming fire—taking all her energy, her thoughts, her time.

Yet she said nothing to her parents, never even repeating the praises showered upon her by the master at the art school, who discovered her genius the first day she attended. Dora felt strangely reticent about speaking of her work, so that Mr. and Mrs. Marsh little guessed her enthusiasm.

But one morning came a great piece of news. In a moment things that had puzzled Dora became clear, and she wondered why she had not thought of them before. Maisie, who but a few months ago was a child like herself, was engaged to be married—and to Harry Saltire!

At first Dora's feelings were strangely mixed as she weighed the *pros* and *cons*. She liked Harry Saltire, and thought he would make a nice brother-in-law; but just a little

inkling of jealousy rankled in Dora's heart. Till now she had been first with Maisie—life companions working and playing together, with no interests apart, no pleasure unshared. Now, in a moment, their paths severed. Maisie had found another who would be first and foremost in her heart, and a change must come.

Dora went to her mother to talk over the exciting news. To her surprise, Mr. and Mrs. Marsh did not appear the least astonished, and only said they expected it all along.

"Are you glad?" asked Dora.

"Oh, yes, dear. Maisie seems so happy. What more could we wish for her? He is such a good, dear fellow."

"Then it is not quite—quite sudden?" gasped Dora. "They have cared for each other some time?"

"Well, it seems so."

"But Maisie never—said—a—word—to me," Dora stammered; "she used to tell me everything."

Mrs. Marsh saw the wounded look on her little daughter's face, and drew her gently to her and kissed the quivering lips.

"Poor little Dora! I understand you will miss Maisie; but you must not be selfish."

So Dora cheered up, and accepted the inevitable.

Then Maisie went to stay at Barton House for what seemed to Dora an unconscionable time. But at last it actually came to counting the hours to her return, and Dora could settle down to nothing.

Maisie and Harry were to come back together, and as Dora saw them drive up, she noticed even from the window a change in her sister. Maisie looked older and more serious. She did not run into the house, but walked—actually walked—with a sedate air.

Dora rushed downstairs two steps at a time, and flew into her arms. They kissed each other warmly, and general congratulations ensued; but soon it became evident to Dora that Maisie was entirely wrapped up in her *fiancé*, and though for the past fortnight she had been daily with Harry, she talked far more to him than to Dora.

After tea a stroll in the park was suggested by Harry, and seconded by Maisie, who did not suggest that Dora should accompany them. The latter watching the departing figures from the balcony, saw them deep in conversation, and somehow a lump rose in her throat, and she turned hastily into the house.

"Oh, mother, why has Maisie altered so? I am nothing to her now," she said brokenly.

"You must not think that, dear," replied Mrs. Marsh, with a touch of genuine sympathy for Dora in her tone. "But it is natural she should be wrapped up in him."

"No, no!" cried the child passionately, "it *isn't* natural—it *isn't* natural!"

She clenched her fists, and her lips whitened as if with pain.

"I want Maisie back—I want her all to myself again! I've waited and longed for this afternoon, and it has meant nothing to her—absolutely nothing!"

At last Dora was realising her own insignificance, but with it came a determination to make a mark in the world. Hitherto her individuality seemed to have been merged in Maisie's; now she stood alone she would step out for herself.

"Mother," she said, "I persuaded Mr. Walters to let me off my painting class to-morrow morning, because it was Maisie's first day at home. Now I shall go; do you think you could arrange it for me?"

And Mrs. Marsh arranged it.

* * * * *

The following morning Dora came into the

Art School, her face a little pale and her eyes languid.

"Are you not well, Miss Marsh?" asked her master, as she took her seat at her easel.

"Oh! quite well, thank you, but I couldn't sleep last night, I was thinking of this picture."

She pointed to a painting on the easel. "You said it was finished, Mr. Walters?"

"Yes, and so it is, the best piece of work we've ever had in the school, and one that makes me very proud."

But Dora shook her head. She had the true genius that is never satisfied.

"I think it could be improved; the model is such a beautiful girl, she has the face of an angel, and this is only the face of a woman."

"Perhaps that is where your art comes in, my dear young lady; the model is too statue-like in feature; you have given her an expression which she lacks, and one which makes the face far more interesting. Your light and shade, too, is marvellous!"

"That was an accident," said Dora; "it came by chance, what people call an inspiration, I suppose. I thought you would be very angry when you saw it."

"You may take the picture home to-day, if you like——" began the master.

"Oh! need I just yet? Surely it could be made better."

Mr. Walters looked surprised. He considered Dora a phenomenon, a girl who never seemed proud of her work, yet whose talent was quite out of the common.

"We have Mr. Cecil Clarke, a great art patron, coming to-day to look round the school," said the master; "I should particularly like him to see it."

Dora said "Yes," vaguely; she felt no special interest in the "great art patron."

But presently he came: a little man with long, white hair and gold-rimmed eye-glasses. He glanced at several paintings, and murmured "very promising," and one or two half compliments, which seemed to gratify Mr. Walters.

"You see," the master explained to the old gentleman, "most of my pupils are so happily situated that they are not training for a professional life. Painting with them is merely an amusement—a pleasant pastime!"

"Charming!" murmured Mr. Clarke in a tone with which he would have said "rubbish!" or "this does not interest me."

"There is a Miss Marsh here, quite extraordinarily clever," continued Mr. Walters,

"but it is a pity she has not the incentive of poverty to make her work."

"I'll see her work, and then I must be off. Any time you like to look round my collection of pictures, Walters, I shall be glad to welcome you. You know my house in St. James's."

And the old man followed the master to Dora's easel.

Mr. Walters introduced the great art-critic to Miss Marsh, and she bowed pleasantly, and stood aside to let him see her picture.

"This isn't the model those others have been painting," said Cecil Clarke quickly.

"Yes, only Miss Marsh has glorified—no, I should say, humanised—her. I am afraid, Miss Marsh, that you imagined those eyes," said Mr. Walters, turning to Dora.

The little old man did not speak for a moment. He peered through his glasses, and then stepped back a pace or two. At last he looked from the picture to Dora, and patted her on the shoulder.

"My congratulations, little lady," he said; "you have a great future before you, and I should like people to know that Cecil Clarke, who never made a mistake, discovered you before the rest of the world. I want to have



He peered through his glasses, and then stepped back a pace or two.

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this picture for my collection. Do you care about selling it?"

"No," replied Dora, "this is for Maisie." Then she checked herself and added hastily: "At least it was for Maisie."

"If it only 'was,' perhaps I have a chance. What would you sell it for? Name your price."

Dora never quite knew why she answered as she did. Her reticence faded under this first glimmer of fame, and she boldly said—

"You could have it for a hundred pounds. It's of value to me, for it was done for Maisie."

Mr. Walters positively gasped at her audacity, but Cecil Clarke, who never denied himself a wish where art was concerned, drew out his cheque-book on the spot, and said—

"That's a bargain, young lady. Walters, where's the ink?"

Dora stood like one in a dream watching him. She wondered if she would wake suddenly to find herself late for her early morning practice. She grew red and then white, the room swam round, and for a moment she thought she was going to faint. Then she took the cheque with a simple "Thank you," and asked Mr. Walters if he would see to the packing of the picture.

It was not the actual money she cared for, but the opinion of the great connoisseur which it represented.

She took a last look at her painting, and walked away.

"Don't speak to me," she said to the maid as she drove home; "I can't talk; if I do I shall scream!"

Her heart was beating wildly, and she clasped her hands tightly together to suppress her excitement. But by the time she got home her feverish joy had somewhat abated, and her voice was quite steady as she greeted Maisie, who had just returned from a ride in the park. "Had a nice turn?" she asked.

"Lovely! By the way, Dora, have you brought the painting? You must give it to me for a wedding present."

"No," replied Dora, a little breathlessly, in spite of her efforts to keep calm, "I haven't brought it. I've sold it, and I shall give you jewellery instead."

PATRICIA

PATRICIA



CHAPTER I

THE SHE-WOLF

THERE was no doubt about it, Patricia Iven ought to have been one of a large family. Dame Nature certainly made a mistake when she selected Patricia for the *rôle* of an only child.

To begin with, she had the social instinct strongly developed. At children's parties Patricia was always a leader, she'd such a knack of organising games, of making things "go." Both older girls and younger relied instinctively upon her management, and though her methods were not always the wisest, they were invariably the most amusing. At school Patricia would have been in her element, but

again the Fates blundered, and she was destined to be educated at home.

Unfortunately our heroine was a motherless girl, and that, of course, placed her at a disadvantage during the early stages of her career. She had passed her fourteenth birthday, and was looking forward to being fifteen.

Outsiders must have envied Patricia her pretty home, with its garden full of flowers, and the pleasant river Thames at the foot of the grounds. They probably called her the luckiest of girls when they saw her spring into her dinghy, hoist up the sail, and skim away across the silver water. But the comparative freedom of her life had its disadvantages. Her father was a very busy man, and spent most of the week in London, but he liked to feel that Patricia was at Thames Bank to welcome him when he came down, either alone or with friends.

If things had gone well during the week he would make much of Patricia, and bring her presents. But sometimes he was silent and depressed; then he hardly noticed his little daughter, and Patricia felt helpless and far away, as if a great gulf divided them that she could not understand.

Mr Iven cherished a great dislike for girls'

schools—it was one of his prejudices. Consequently Patricia was left to the care of governesses engaged by an aunt, who thought it a great bother, and selected the first available person, with very little discrimination. Occasionally her choice proved a happy one, but even then Patricia yearned for companionship, grew lazy over her lessons through want of competition, and frequently ended by quarrelling with her instructress. Some girls need a great deal of understanding, and in writing of Patricia I think I may say she was frequently misunderstood. Perhaps this was her own fault. It is difficult to judge.

In spite of a somewhat hot temper Patricia won the good will of all her father's servants. With them, as with girls and boys of her own age, she was extremely popular.

At the moment this story opens she was talking to Jane the housemaid in excitable tones.

"I don't know what I shall do!" she was saying; "I don't know what I shall do!"

Her pretty face looked troubled and on the verge of crying, for a tell-tale quiver about the lips, a mistiness in the eyes, and a general expression of effort, betrayed a coming storm. In one hand she held a telegram, and with the

other she ruffled her hair, making it distractedly untidy, and in keeping with her tone of despair.

"Father promised to come home this afternoon and see me through with the new governess Aunt Lena has engaged. Now, if you please, he telegraphs, 'Business prevents me returning to-day'! Oh, dear! isn't it awful? And she is a foreigner, too! I do hate strangers, and I've got a feeling Fraulein Parbs will be horrid. I *have* been unlucky! Only think, Jane, three new governesses this year! Why do the nice ones always get ill, or marry, or have sick mothers? It's too bad, really! How would you like it? How would you like to be alone—morning, afternoon, and evening—with some one you had never seen before? It sometimes takes ages to break the ice. Thank goodness it is summer; I can show her round the garden, and pick her flowers. Governesses are often very fond of flowers. I have never been left alone to receive a new governess before; it is rather hard lines!"

Patricia looked at the telegram again, and sighed the deepest of deep sighs, which seemed to come from her boots and filter slowly through her lungs, till it ended in something like a groan.

"I daresay she'll be very nice," said Jane

consolingly. "Sometimes them as we thinks we sha'n't like is them as we likes the best. What time will she be here, Miss?"

"About five. I want to have tea ready; and will you ask Cook from me to make some hot buttered toast? Mind and tell her it's to be very special toast."

Patricia was sorry when Jane went downstairs; it was a relief to talk. Her father's telegram had seriously upset her, and she was contemplating whether to have a good cry, or go out in the garden, when her eye fell on a book she had not yet read.

"The very thing," she said to herself; "I'll go and sit in the hall in front of the big clock and read. There is nothing like a story to make you forget these sort of bothers. At a quarter to five I will brush my hair and get tidy. Perhaps Fraülein Parbs won't be so bad after all!"

So Patricia took up the book and resorted to her favourite nook in a window-seat, glancing before opening it at the tall grandfather's clock opposite.

"Now, Grandfather," she said, holding up one finger warningly, "don't you make any mistake about the time; it's most important to-day, so strike the quarters loudly, please."

She put up her feet, with her heels against the shutters, and soon became absorbed in her story book. Patricia had all a boy's love for adventures; she liked tales of shipwreck and battle, of savages and slavery. Her blood tingled with pleasurable excitement over hair-breadth escapes and furious warfare. I believe this is not an uncommon taste with girls.

Grandfather obeyed her demands and proclaimed the passing time loudly—lustily. His voice was surely stronger than usual this afternoon, but Patricia heeded him not.

Hers was deafness of mind, for so far as imagination is concerned, she had left her corner in the window and reached a great forest somewhere in the domains of Wonderland. The trees here were taller and thicker than the shady chestnuts of Thames Bank. They had monster boughs, tenanted by strange birds, who said still stranger things to each other in an unknown language, and occasionally cracked jokes at the expense of the crawling creatures below. But the best of it was, a beautiful knight, with flowing golden hair, came riding through the forest, perhaps looking for his lady love, or perhaps on his way to some gay tournament.

Grandfather had chimed a quarter to five—

but what did that matter? Were there not a thousand musical chimes pealing from a noble city standing on a hill beyond the enchanted forest?

But in the good old days of romance the very name of forest conjured up hidden terrors, and it so happened in this particular story that wolves—lean, hungry, open-mouthed lurked round the path chosen by the curly haired knight.

These bloodthirsty monsters, who were really demons in disguise, had just set upon the hero—when the scrunching of wheels on the gravel outside heralded Fraülein Parbs' arrival. The book fell from Patricia's hands, and glided on the floor quite gracefully without making any noise, as the hall bell rang.

Five o'clock! Five o'clock! Oh! horrors; and her hair was all tumbled—tangled with despair rumplings; while her brain was full of romance, mystery, and the horror of wolves!

She didn't want Fraülein Parbs bothering just at the most exciting moment, she might have put herself off a few minutes longer!

Patricia sprang from the window-seat like a frightened fawn. The door had not yet been opened, and she longed instinctively to escape.

Brushing past the servant, she ran half way

up the stairs and peered over the banisters, with palpitating heart, to judge the new comer from her voice.

The tones that reached Patricia were not encouraging, though she failed to catch the exact words. Fraülein appeared to be scolding somebody or everybody about her luggage, and talking, far louder than was necessary, in foreign accents.

"Vere is Mees Iven?" she cried. "Go quickly, and tell her I am 'ere."

Neither of the servants seemed in a hurry to obey her orders, but like a cat scenting a rat, she brushed past the maids, and espied a long lock of Patricia's wayward hair hanging over the banisters.

"Ah! she is there! Come down at once, it is very rude to listen!"

Patricia emerged shamefacedly at being thus discovered. The first sight of Fraülein Parbs gave her a sense of shock.

The wolf face peering up from a round, black, poke bonnet staggered the girl.

Yes, undoubtedly, Fraülein bore a strong, a striking resemblance to the animals that so lately had fiendishly attacked the knight in the forest.

Involuntarily Patricia nicknamed her the "She-Wolf."

"I have to apologise," said the girl, "for my father's absence."

This was a good sentence she thought—delivering the words with quite a grown-up air.

Fraülein Parbs had evidently forgotten the existence of Mr. Iven; her mind centred on her pupil and the luggage that was being conveyed upstairs.

Patricia led the way to Fraülein's room with a sinking heart.

"Jane has brought you some hot water," she said. "Perhaps you would like to wash your hands before tea."

"Hot vater! hot vater!" cried Fraülein, fanning herself with a large, black-bordered handkerchief. "Absurd! take it away; I vash in cold!"

The ungracious reply only served to heighten Patricia's unfavourable impression.

She removed the can without a word, and carried it from the room.

"Here you are, Jane!" she said, meeting the maid on the stairs, "you can take the 'hot vater' (imitating Fraülein's accent) away. Our little attentions are not appreciated, she will 'vash in cold'!"

Patricia became so like Fraülein as she

spoke, that Jane had some difficulty in keeping her countenance.

"Don't you like her, Miss?" she queried.

Patricia clasped her hands behind her back, and leant against the door of the hot-water cupboard with a pensive air.

"No, Jane; decidedly and emphatically no! My intentions are sometimes misleading, my first impressions—never. Do you judge people by your first impressions, Jane?"

"I can't say I have thought about it, Miss. I generally takes people as they come. I don't know that I've ever thought about impressions."

"Lucky woman! I wish I could 'take people as they come.' It sounds easy enough. But Fraülein is like a witch in that poke bonnet, and there's a rasping tone in her voice that makes me feel rebellious already. I know I shall do something dreadful if she stays here long. Oh! dear, she's calling me. Isn't it a voice to bring the ceiling down? I must go back to my old She-Wolf!"

Patricia ran along the passage at such a pace that she collided with Fraülein at the end.

"I beg your pardon!" she stammered. "I couldn't stop myself, and I thought you were in your room."

"It is vary unladylike not to look vere you are going. Young ladies should valk—not run."

Patricia opened her eyes in astonishment.

"I always run," she said, "it is such waste of time to walk; and father doesn't want me to be ladylike, he lets me do everything just like a boy. I often think he wishes I were a boy."

They had reached the schoolroom by this time, and Patricia drew the most comfortable chair to the table for Fraülein Parbs.

"I daresay you are tired after your journey," said the girl—who really had very pretty manners at her command, when she cared to exert them. "Shall I pour out the tea, while you rest?"

"I am quite able to pour it out for myself," replied Fraülein, laying her claw-like fingers upon the teapot handle.

"Rebuff number two!" thought Patricia, who had spoken in kindness, and felt snubbed for her pains.

For a while they ate silently, Fraülein's appetite proving a large one.

But it was not in Patricia's nature to remain silent for long, and she gradually re-opened conversation, with details about the place and their daily habits.

"Of course, I've lots of hobbies," she said. "I think just at the present moment Hetty, Betty, and Tom make my favourite hobby."

"Who are these people, and where do they come from?" asked Fraulein.

"Hetty and Betty are twins, and Tom is a year older. They are the coachman's children, and live over the stables. Their mother, Mrs. Moore, is rather delicate, so I've sort of adopted them. They were horrid little children before I took them in hand—they used to cry for everything. Mrs. Moore is rather weak-minded, as well as weak-bodied. Children always seem to me like very superior dolls. Hetty, Betty, and Tom are my dolls just now. I've made them the sweetest little frocks you ever saw. Jane helped me, and she is a very good dressmaker."

Patricia's honesty forced her to own that "Jane helped." Patricia, truly, designed the style, chose the material, and worked spasmodically at the garments on wet days, but without a little friendly aid it is doubtful whether the twin frocks would ever have seen the light.

"The two girls," she continued, "were christened Henrietta and Beatrice—such a mouthful for those small children, wasn't it?"

I believe they were called by their proper names for three or four months. They grew into Hetty and Betty with short frocks and teeth. But you're not interested—I'm boring you."

"Vat did you say?"

Patricia repeated herself, "I'm boring you."

"Not at all," replied Fraülein, taking a third cup of tea. "You have been talking into my deaf ear, and with that I 'ear nothing. At lessons you will sit on my left side, then we get on all right."

Patricia's efforts collapsed.

"Perhaps," she said, when tea was over "you would not mind if I finished my book."

Fraülein nodded consent, and Patricia went back to her wolves.

CHAPTER II

AMATEUR ACROBATS

“**W**HAT do you think of my new governess?”

Patricia was standing in her house-shoes on the damp grass, wet with morning dew. She always went out in the garden before breakfast—loved getting up early and wandering about.

The question came from her suddenly—the new governess being uppermost in her mind just then. It was addressed to an old gardener, who was leisurely weeding a border.

He looked up, and answered in a slow, deliberate voice—

“I don’t know, Missy ; I ain’t seen the lady yet.”

“No, of course not ; how stupid of me to ask” replied Patricia, watching a wriggling worm escape the deadly onslaught of his hoe.

"I can't help thinking that you must have had rather a good time as a boy, though it seems a pity not to learn."

"I wouldn't mind being able to read—or to write a bit now and again," said the old man; "but in my young days there was no school board, nor free education!"

He heaved a deep sigh as he uprooted a large weed. Patricia wondered if it was caused by the weight of the earth or the weight of his ignorance.

"What does it matter?" she cried consolingly; "you're quite as happy without knowing the details of things. You can enjoy the Thames just as much without learning that it's the largest, if not the longest English river—that it rises in the Cotswold Hills, and flows into the North Sea. Then there are the names of the tiresome tributaries. Oh! it's all very bothering!"

She took up a stone, and flung it into the river as she spoke.

The splash of the pebble and a loud, angry voice from the upper path broke simultaneously upon her ear—

"Patricia, you naughty girl, come off the grass! See—your shoes—they are all vet and spoil!"

"Scolding again!" murmured the girl under her breath, as she turned to wish Fraülein good-morning.

"They are old shoes," Patricia explained; "it doesn't matter."

"But you keep me waiting for my breakfast; I search you this long time, while the eggs and bacon get cold. You do that purposely to annoy! If you cannot be punctual at meals, I must forbid you to go out early."

Patricia tossed her head, but said nothing.

"You seemed vary interested as you talked vit dat man! It is a bad 'abit to talk to those people."

"Why!" exclaimed Patricia, "that was dear old Scratch-up! I've known him ever since I was five years old. We call him Scratch-up, because he never does any real good in the garden, but just picks about and amuses himself, and sees that the other gardeners work. He is quite a friend of the family."

She spoke loudly into Fraülein's left ear, and her cheeks flushed with indignation.

It was not a very happy beginning for the day.

The breakfast had been taken away and kept hot in the kitchen, so Fraülein's anxiety might have been spared. It was rather a depressing breakfast all the same, and the

lesson hours dragged that morning more than they had ever dragged before.

It was with a sigh of relief that Patricia escaped to the garden, and made her way towards the stables, in search of her "dolls."

Hetty, Betty, and Tom greeted her with a shriek of delight, swarming round like so many bees.

"We thought you was never coming!" lisped Betty, pressing a hot little hand into Patricia's palm.

The twins were a picturesque couple, with limp, fair hair, cut square on their foreheads, and very rosy cheeks. Patricia had taught them pretty manners, and took a pride in their appearance.

"Tom," she said, "your fingers are sticky, you've been eating candy. I can't play with you like that!"

She took his small wrist, and holding it under the stable pump, pumped vigorously.

"Oh! dear, now I've wetted your sleeves; what a bother!" she sighed. "But I daresay they'll dry."

She sank on the garden-roller, hot from the effort, for the pump handle was stiff, and contemplated the little trio, with the idea of amusing herself.

"I've been wondering," she said, "what you children will do when you're grown up. You will have to do something, of course. How would you like to be acrobats—performing people?"

The children clustered round her knees, excited by the suggestion.

"I went to an entertainment in town where they did all sorts of marvellous things," Patricia continued. "There was a bicycle troupe: a girl, about my size, performed with lots of little children, and seemed to do the things quite easily. It made me long to try. Now supposing we make up a troupe of four—wouldn't it surprise people? We could begin with quite simple things. I am sure we might all manage to ride on one bicycle."

The thought proved alluring in the extreme, and immediate steps were taken to bring it into practice.

"My bicycle won't do," said Patricia, "because Tom must stand up behind. I'll borrow father's new machine."

No sooner said than done.

Mr. Iven's bicycle was fetched from the stables, and led to a far lawn beyond the shrubbery, at the end of which a sloping bank provided a convenient incline to mount from.

Each child was given a flag, made in the amateur fashion of tying a handkerchief to a stick. Then Patricia delivered a short lecture on the first attributes of an acrobat.

"An acrobat," she said, "never gets frightened, always keeps cool, and kisses his or her hand at the close of the performance. While practising, it's no good making a fuss over two or three falls; if you're going to mind that, it's better to give up being an acrobat at once."

The children entered into the spirit of the play, fired by Patricia's enthusiasm.

Who could have felt frightened in the presence, and under the influence of, this fearless ringleader, as she rolled up her sleeves, tossed off her hat, and prepared for action?

"Hetty must sit on my shoulders, and hold on tight to my head," she continued. "Don't mind pulling my hair, just clutch fast, and tuck your toes under my arms—it is lucky you're so light."

As she spoke, she unlaced Hetty's boots, and threw them aside into a clump of dog-daisies growing on the bank.

"Betty can sit up in front, either on the bar or the handles—it won't be comfortable, but it is sure to look effective. Then when we are once started, Tommy must stand on the back

wheel, holding round my waist—I shall ride round and round in a circle, and when we are quite perfect we'll practise something else."

With unlimited confidence in her own powers, Patricia hoisted the twins into their various positions, holding the bicycle by the bank. Then with great difficulty she managed to settle herself on the seat, still keeping one foot upon the incline.

"Are you sure you're holding tight, children?" she queried. "All right, then, I'm steady. Are you ready? Go!"

Though perilous to an extreme, Patricia pedalled manfully, every moment growing more fatigued.

"Spring on quickly, Tommy, at the back," she panted, "I can't keep this up long!"

The next moment an extra pair of hands were clinging to her already overweighted body. The strain told, and she felt her muscles ache, her head swim. Hetty was tugging her hair mercilessly, and Betty had no idea of balance.

Then, as the rashness of it all flashed through Patricia's brain, a paralysing thought took possession of her—

How was she to stop?

The art of alighting from a man's machine had not yet been practised, or even attempted, by this inexperienced performer.

The start was difficult enough—the finish loomed like a nightmare before Patricia. Oh! if only somebody would come and arrest her progress, catch her, and save her from a terrible catastrophe! Wildly she looked round for a helping hand, afraid of transmitting her fear to the trusting children, who as yet were blissfully unconscious of danger.

"I shall have to go on and on," she thought—"round—round—the lawn—till help is sent. Oh! dear, Hetty grows heavier every minute!"

"I'se tired," lisped Betty, nearly upsetting the bicycle as she spoke.

"Tired!" thought Patricia; "I'm dead beat if you only knew, and I can't get off. I would not mind for myself, but I mustn't make a jump for it, and risk killing all these children."

"Tom," she said—when she had sufficient breath to answer—"jump off and run and fetch somebody to help us down. Be quick, there's a good boy."

Tom obeyed, but the bicycle swerved as he let go of Patricia, and sent him head first on the lawn. The others wheeled on, without upsetting, but Tom, who had grazed his knee, set

up a pitiable howl, more frightened than hurt by his fall.

The sound instilled fear into the hearts of the twins, they puckered up their faces and prepared to join Tom in chorus, but Patricia, now thoroughly alarmed and exhausted, called loudly to the boy—

“Don’t sit there doing nothing like a cry-baby! Run quickly, do you hear? I can’t keep going much longer.”

He scampered off, the tears still trickling down his face. The first person he met was Fraülein Parbs.

“They are playin’ acrobats!” he said, pointing to the lawn. “It’s an awful, painful game.”

He rubbed his knee and ran on, leaving Fraülein to draw her own conclusions.

“Mon Dieu!” shrieked Fraülein, as the apparition met her eyes, “there is the devil in that girl! Patricia!—Patricia! get off at once—do you ’ear me? Obey, I say—I will not see these follies. Ah! she goes on—she pays no heed—she defies me!”

Great drops of perspiration had broken out on Patricia’s forehead, there seemed a mist before her eyes, and her shoulders felt breaking beneath their burden.

“Catch hold of the bicycle, Fraülein ; I will come round by you.”

“Ah ! it is all very well to mock. I see to this—you do not go unpunished.”

So saying Fraülein withdrew herself to the path, and refused to render assistance.

Another moment and Patricia must have fallen. Some one came quickly from the shrubbery, followed by Tom—a tall, well-built man, with grey hair.

He ran down the bank like a boy, caught the bicycle and held it firmly with one hand, lifting first Hetty, then Betty to the ground, and finally landing Patricia safe on the welcome grass.

Too exhausted to speak, she fell half-fainting on the bank, while the children, wide eyed and astonished, watched curiously.

“Oh ! father !” she gasped at last. “Father, I’m so glad you’ve come !”

Mr. Iven looked down kindly at his little girl.

“Whatever induced you to ride three on a bicycle, and on my new Acaténe too ?”

“We *were* four !” said Patricia, a glimmer of pride coming into her eyes as her failing spirits revived. “Tom stood up behind most of the time.”

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...have injured those

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"I am afraid my rash little girl frightened you as much as she frightened me," he said. "Patricia has a wonderful knack of doing foolish things and escaping unhurt. I was the same at her age. I ought to have been killed a dozen times over!"

"She does not mind what I say, she is not easy to control," replied Fraülein, shaking her head so that the coalscuttle bonnet waggled itself sideways in the most ludicrous manner. "I never saw such a tomboy—it is a great pity! Perhaps if you were to speak to her very seriously it might make good effect."

Fraülein paused in her suggestion, for Mr. Iven's face looked anything but promising. He hated being called upon to find fault directly on returning.

"I have pointed out the danger," he replied, "and forbidden Patricia to do it again. Now I must ask you to spare her to me for the rest of the day, as I want to take her out to lunch."

Fraülein looked dismayed beyond measure. She had fixed in her mind a task to set Patricia as a punishment after her lesson hours, which were to have been prolonged in consequence of unruly behaviour.

"But it is no holiday, Monsieur," she

"It was very dangerous, and you must never do it again. You might have injured those children for life, Patricia!"

"Yes, if you had not come down unexpectedly and just saved us! I shan't forget it in a hurry; my shoulders are horribly stiff. We have not hurt your bicycle, that's one good thing. And it is a mercy you are here!" she continued, glancing back over her shoulder to the approaching figure of Fraülein. "Perhaps you will get me off the just wrath of my new oppressor."

"Good gracious, who is that old woman?" asked Mr. Iven, catching a glimpse of the full black skirts and coalscuttle bonnet of Patricia's governess.

"Fraülein Parbs. She is in a dreadful temper with me, and we don't get on at all. She thinks me a horrid girl!"

Hetty, Betty, and Tom—all three holding hands—stood in a row and inspected Fraülein as if she were a curiosity.

Fraülein, objecting to their scrutiny, shoved them away with her umbrella, at which they appeared much frightened, and ran as if for their lives.

Mr. Iven greeted the stranger politely, in the manner habitual to him.

"I am afraid my rash little girl frightened you as much as she frightened me," he said. "Patricia has a wonderful knack of doing foolish things and escaping unhurt. I was the same at her age. I ought to have been killed a dozen times over!"

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"But it is not a half-holiday, Monsieur," she

stammered, "and Mademoiselle has much work to do."

"Oh! never mind the work, that will keep," said Mr. Iven, smiling, as Patricia came up and slipped her arm through his. "Are you ready to come?" he continued, turning to Patricia. "Owen Dunstan drove me down from town, and he is waiting to take us on to Lewis Park, where they expect us to lunch. I had a letter from his wife this morning, especially inviting you."

"How lovely!" cried Patricia. "Is Mr. Dunstan here with his drag?"

"Yes—come along."

Patricia snatched up her hat, which had been reposing amongst the daisies, put it on her tumbled hair, and declared herself ready for departure.

Fraülein followed expostulating. "You must change your dress, you cannot go out that figure! Look, you have stained your cuffs and soiled your sleeves. At least you must put on a clean shirt."

Patricia replied that Mrs. Dunstan did not mind her being untidy. Mrs. Dunstan had girls of her own who were dreadful romps, and it didn't matter a bit.

"Well, you must come as you are, or stay at

home," said Mr. Iven; "we can't wait for you!"

Patricia did not hesitate. Without even waiting to fetch a pair of gloves, she was up on the box seat by Mr. Dunstan, waving goodbye to Fraülein.

She had not even so much as a clean handkerchief to produce at lunch, for hers had been left on Betty's flag at the far end of the lawn.

But what are these trifling disadvantages to a light heart such as Patricia's?

Hurrah for Liberty! She had thrown off her shackles for the day, and was away with the warm sun tanning her cheeks, and the fresh breeze playing havoc with her loose, dishevelled hair!

CHAPTER III

AN UNEXPECTED HOLIDAY

WAS there ever a more glorious atmosphere, or was it merely that every turn of the drag wheels put space between Patricia and Fraülein Parbs?

Patricia felt inclined to sing, so great was her happiness, as she looked proudly down from her exalted seat and saw the three children, Hetty, Betty, and Tom, safe and sound of limb, watching her drive away

She kissed her hand to them, noticing for the first time she had forgotten to put Betty's boots on again. The child was standing out in the road in her socks, while the boots still lay in the clump of dog-daisies.

"How dreadful of me!" Patricia said aloud.

"What's dreadful?" asked Mr. Dunstan.

"Oh! so many things," she answered cheerfully. "I've been getting into hot water all

round ; but it doesn't matter now, I am going to enjoy myself."

With these words Patricia collapsed into one of those delightful silences which a thoroughly contented and observant mind can enjoy. The very fact of being alive seemed a pleasure to her then. The air smelt sweet with the scent of may, and Patricia was delighted to find she could see into everybody's garden from her high seat. She made up little stories for her own benefit about the children in the different gardens. One large open space was a school playground, where a troop of girls, evidently just released from lessons, came hurrying out. The fence round this playground had been built high that no one could look over, so Patricia felt at a great advantage as she scanned the sacred precincts. Some of the inmates were strolling arm-in-arm, deep in conversation, others had racquets and tennis balls, which they were carrying towards an asphalte court. All looked happy and occupied. The sight of these girls together set Patricia longing.

She turned to her father and pointed across the fence.

"Look!" she said, "look! that is a school. What a lot of girls! Mustn't it be jolly for them?"

Mr. Iven glanced back ; the sight made no impression upon him. He lit a cigarette, not noticing the eager expression in Patricia's eyes.

"My girls won't go to school," said Mr. Dunstan. "If it is even mentioned we have a scene—tears, and all the rest of it ! They don't learn anything at home ; but I'm not very fond of blue stockings myself, and they are rather nice little dunces."

"Ah !" replied Patricia, "they're two, that makes all the difference."

Something pathetic in the tone of this only child touched Mr. Dunstan.

"You should often come over and see Vi and Rhoda," he said. "It isn't far, and you bicycle."

"I will in the holidays," she answered ; "but it's no sooner playtime then one has to begin lessons again. Now at school one always has companions——"

She broke off and resorted again to silence, for that glimpse across the paling made the very mention of school doubly painful.

Mr. Dunstan pointed with his whip to a garden on their left.

"There is a bewildering mass of bloom !" he said. "What do you say to that for colour ?"

Patricia turned and looked in the direction indicated.

A vivid clump of rhododendrons met a huge pink and yellow azalea bed, at the back of which flowered two tall laburnum trees, dropping their gold amongst pink, white, and crimson may. In this same garden, under a chestnut tree covered with spiral blooms, hung a blue and yellow hammock with tassels of many hues. In it a girl lounged with a book, looking exquisitely comfortable.

As the drag went by, a small brother, who had been contemplating her mischievously, pointed towards Patricia.

"Look at that girl on the drag!" he cried.

His sister half turned in the hammock to see Patricia; and as she did so, the boy sprang with his hands on the bough above, wet from a recent shower, shaking down a deluge of soaking chestnut flowers over her clean white frock. Patricia was whirled on, and missed the sequel to this little domestic comedy, but it almost reconciled her to being brotherless.

"I hadn't noticed how wet the trees were," she said, looking up.

Presently they reached the park gates, and were driving towards a large white house. The drag had evidently been sighted from the

windows, for two girls came running to meet it—girls of about Patricia's age and height, with rosy faces which spoke of a healthy, outdoor life.

"We're so glad you have come, Patricia," they cried, helping her down; "Miss Maurice has been waiting to see. We are to have a half-holiday now."

"Is Miss Maurice your daily governess?"

"Yes, and she's such a dear—doesn't mind going away in the least; in fact, she enjoys a holiday quite as much as we do."

"I wish Fraülein was like that," said Patricia.

"She is grudging me to-day most dreadfully."

Violet and Rhoda led the way round the house to their schoolroom window, which opened on the lawn.

"It is a lovely position for a schoolroom," they said, "because you so often get disturbed, especially when people are staying here. They pass the window and come in to talk to Miss Maurice. When our beloved Colonel Foster was here last year, he used to pick a great cabbage leaf full of strawberries and bring them in all hot and squashy for us to eat. Of course, as he was a visitor, Miss Maurice could not say anything, and we used to eat them very slowly while he told us stories of his travels, which

Miss Maurice said afterwards were as good as a lesson."

"What a lovely way of doing lessons! You *are* lucky girls!" said Patricia.

"But we have no river," sighed Rhoda. "We envy you that most terribly. I have asked for a boat for my birthday present, and father has almost promised to give it me. If he does, we shall have splendid times."

"Yes," put in Violet, "mother and I were talking it over this morning. She thinks that rowing would do us a lot of good. My chest is rather contracted, and Rhoda stoops."

Patricia looked a little doubtfully at Violet's broad shoulders, well thrown back, but murmured "Yes."

"We should keep it at Schinkfield's boat-house—just below your lawn," Violet continued, "then we could bicycle over after tea and row about every evening."

"Delightful!" cried Patricia. "When is your birthday?"

"Next Monday; and to tell you the truth, the boat is already bought, only they won't say so—they like to keep up the suspense."

"How do you know?"

"Ah! that's my secret. I am rather good at finding out things, am I not, Rhoda?"

"Yes, she would make a capital amateur detective. Here is Miss Maurice."

Patricia looked up, and lo and behold the sweetest and freshest of girls in a pink cotton frock, a sailor hat tilted slightly forward, and a rose-coloured sunshade under her arm.

"She is only twenty-two, but she knows all about everything!" whispered Violet.

"Patricia has come!" cried Rhoda, putting up the pink parasol, and balancing it on the palm of her hand.

"So no more lessons for to-day," said Miss Maurice, smiling. "Well, you *are* anxious to get rid of me! Not very flattering," taking the sunshade from Rhoda.

"Oh, dearest, I don't want you to go. Do stay and play with us."

Miss Maurice had to submit to a somewhat vigorous hug, after which she made good her escape, while the three girls went to wash their hands for lunch.

Patricia quite fell in love with her friends' bedroom. From the centre of the ceiling a bar was slung on which to practise athletic exercises in light attire, and Violet proceeded to hoist herself up and hang by her knees, a feat which Patricia greatly envied.

"Quite like an acrobat, isn't it?" said Rhoda.

The word acrobat brought a flush of humiliation to Patricia's cheek, as she remembered her failure of the morning.

"It must be nice sharing a room," said Patricia.

"Oh! I couldn't sleep alone," replied Violet. "I should die of the blues! Rhoda and I have such lovely after-bed talks; we always talk ourselves to sleep. We have imaginary families, who do the most exciting things, but always within the limits of possibility. If it is the least impossible we say, 'nothing of that happened,' and go to sleep with clear consciences."

"I have sometimes tried sleeping with a kitten," Patricia said, "but they generally get playful at about five o'clock in the morning. They bound up and down over the quilt, and claw at your hair, or chase imaginary mice round the room."

"If you're fond of animals, Patricia, I am sure father would give you one of our bull-dog puppies. We have five, and they are such darlings. You could take it home to-night. There is the luncheon bell; come along, and we will ask him."

Patricia, delighted at the idea, followed Violet to the dining-room. She found that

Mr. Dunstan had already offered her father the dog, and after a little persuasion she induced him to accept it.

"You must take the responsibility, then," he said. "You know what puppies are, they destroy everything."

"Oh, yes," replied Patricia joyfully, "I will undertake the entire responsibility!"

"What are you young people going to do this afternoon?" asked Mrs. Dunstan.

"Oh, potter about," they answered. "We shall amuse ourselves somehow."

The three girls, linked arm-in-arm, with Patricia in the middle, wandered away hatless across the park.

"We never wear hats in the garden," said Rhoda. "We are like blue-coat boys in that respect, and we never get sunstroke. See how thick our hair is. Mother says it is because we leave it uncovered in the open air."

Rhoda shook back her long curls, which hung below her waist.

"It is much more comfortable," Patricia replied, whose fringe stood up straight against the wind, and fluttered picturesquely.

"'Ver is your hat?' is one of Fraülein's conventionalities. She calls it after me every time I put my nose out of doors."

"Don't you love shuffling your feet through buttercups?" said Violet. "This grass has dried since the morning."

"Where shall we go?" asked Dora. "This way?"

"No, the other," cried Violet.

"Well, don't pull me in half," pleaded Patricia.

"I want to show you our tree by the railway," continued Violet. "It was rooted up in that fearful gale last winter, and we can climb right inside and watch the trains go by. Rhoda and I nearly always come down by the line, and sometimes we have walked along it nearly to the tunnel, that is fearfully exciting!"

Had Mr. or Mrs. Dunstan known that Violet and Rhoda were accustomed to play on the line, their horror and consternation would have been great, since nothing is more dangerous. But such an idea never entered the heads of those fond parents. The girls themselves knew no fear, nor yet Patricia, who, it will already have been seen, was as thoughtless as it is well possible to be.

The railway was hidden by high trees from the house and stables, and skirted the estate. A turn brought them in full view of the line, bordered by buttercup banks. A train was

standing stationary, just by the uprooted tree Violet had described.

"I expect there is another train in the station," said Rhoda, "and this one is waiting for it to go on. The platform is just along there" (pointing to the right), "about five minutes' off. We sometimes go into the signal box and watch the signals working. The station master is a great friend of ours."

As Rhoda spoke a brilliant idea suggested itself to Patricia. She always thought of the most madcap things, and this was a move that even Rhoda or Violet would never have contemplated but for her misguiding influence.

"Here's a lark!" she cried, running up the bank to the train. "Come on, girls, we'll get in! Won't they be surprised at the station to see us jump out without hats, as if we had come a journey."

By this time Patricia had opened the door and swung herself into an empty first-class carriage, absolutely reckless of the train moving on at the wrong moment. Fortunately it remained passive as she pulled Rhoda and Violet in after her.

"Oh, what a high step, and how heavy you are!" she gasped. "I wonder we ever managed it. I don't think any one saw us."

She sank on the seat laughing softly, the sort of suppressed merriment that comes in the most critical moment of a joke. Rhoda and Violet joined in, thoroughly amused at the undertaking.

"It was a beautiful notion of yours, Patricia, this impromptu journey," said Rhoda, when she had recovered her composure. "I wish the train would go on, don't you?"

"Madam, you have but to wish to be obeyed," replied Patricia as a jerk heralded the fulfilment of her desire. "We're off—three cheers! It *was* a triumph scrambling up from the line; lucky our legs were long enough!"

Violet sprang to her feet, rushed to the window, and thrust out her head. Then she turned and faced the other two.

"You've made a pretty mess of it," she said to Patricia, "we're *going the wrong way!*"

A cry escaped Rhoda. "Good gracious, so we are!"

Patricia looked at them for a moment too taken aback to speak. It was the second time she had blundered since the morning.

"The wrong way!" she gasped. "Oh, how *awful!*"

CHAPTER IV

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF THREE GIRLS

ALL three girls stared at each other in blank astonishment. Then, simultaneously, the hopeless absurdity of their position struck them, and they burst out laughing again.

"Oh! what shall we do?" cried Rhoda, half hysterically, wavering between laughter and tears. "If only we'd got hats it wouldn't matter quite so much!"

"And where are we going—where is this train taking us?" asked Patricia.

"That's just what we don't know!" groaned Violet. "It may be going anywhere. Perhaps it won't stop for hours—an express most probably!"

"I have it!" cried Patricia, springing on the seat—"the alarm bell! I'll ring that; it isn't a criminal offence, and anything is better than uncertainty."

Rhoda and Violet pulled her forcibly down before she had time to touch the button. They were getting a little sceptical about Patricia's ideas.

"We don't want to pay £5," said Rhoda, "and it makes no end of a commotion and fuss! We are in a hole, and we must try and get out of it as quietly as possible, though what we are going to do at a strange station without tickets and without hats I don't know! What excuse can we make? Perhaps there is a law forbidding people to get in from the line, and we shall be imprisoned."

The suggestion fired Patricia with fresh supplies of courage.

"I shall say it was my fault. I'll get you innocent ones off, anyhow—trust me for that!"

"I am the most to blame," said Rhoda. "I told you the train was going into the station; I spoke without thinking, and did not really look. Then you took me so by surprise, I had not time to consider. I just let you lug me in and supposed it would be all right."

"Have we any money between us?" asked Violet, feeling in her pocket. "Not a sou; only a penknife and two handkerchiefs, one of which belongs to you, Rhoda"—tossing it across.

"I am collecting farthings," said Rhoda. "I've just two in my pocket—that won't help us much!"

"And I did not bring my purse. Father fetched me in such a hurry, I had no time even to tidy," said Patricia. "Isn't it hopeless and dreadful? How shall we ever get back?"

"This is the sort of adventure that is very amusing afterwards and horribly awkward at the time," declared Violet, with an air of wisdom. "We shall tell it to our children some day, and they will wonder if it really happened or is only a make-believe. Perhaps we are dreaming now. After all, is it likely or possible that we three—Rhoda, Patricia, and myself—should be travelling away—away—goodness knows where, in this destitute condition? We are in a train, but we don't know what train; and every moment it is getting nearer tea-time, when they will expect us home. Yes, it has all the bewildering muddle of a dream, without the relief of waking."

"Father will get anxious and want to go back," said Patricia, "and there will be no end of a fuss. If we only had money enough to telegraph when we get to a station. Oh, dear! I always do everything wrong! It is just my luck!"

"Perhaps they will send people hunting all over the country, and have paragraphs in the evening papers—'Mysterious disappearance of three girls!' It will really look just as if we've been spirited away," Rhoda said, feeling a certain satisfaction in that thrilling conclusion.

"What a pace this train goes! It seems to be doing it on purpose, taking a fiendish delight in carrying us on further and further! After all, it puts off the dreaded moment of confession. First we have to face the officials, and then the home people. Do you feel equal to it, girls?"

Patricia asked this question, folding her arms and crossing one knee over the other.

Her independent manner braced Violet to reply—

"I feel equal to anything! After all, much worse adventures happened in history, and we are not going to be beheaded!"

This philosophic attitude inspired Rhoda with a spirit of resignation. She perched herself on one of the arms of the seat, and began to whistle and hum to herself—"Rhoda rode a Roadster, on the road to Rye!"

Perhaps this merriment appeared a little forced and artificial to the other two, for they exchanged glances in significant silence.

The train began to slow its pace, and Violet again leant out of the window.

"Are we coming to a station?" asked Patricia.

"No, there is nothing in sight; but we are certainly stopping."

"Splendid!" Patricia cried. "If only we could get out here, it would save us all the difficulty of explaining, and we should get so stared at without our hats on a strange platform."

"This train is rather good at unexpected waits," said Rhoda. "Now's our chance!"

The sudden cessation of movement brought the desired opportunity. Patricia opened the door and sprang on the line; then she gave her hands to the sisters to prevent their falling, each being afraid the train might move on and leave one alone imprisoned therein.

"Don't push so!" cried Violet.

"Let me jump first!" from Rhoda.

Then they half tumbled out together, nearly breaking Patricia's arm.

"You *are* clumsy!" she said.

"Look out!—a train——"

The alarm came from Violet, and the three girls rushed across the adjoining line like frightened hares; only just in time, too, as

an express whirled by at the rate of a mile a minute.

For once they were fairly unnerved, realising how narrow had been their escape from the jaws of death. They looked at each other with blanched faces.

"Thank Heaven we're safe!" gasped Patricia. "A second later and there would not have been much left of any of us."

She felt her knees knocking together still, though the danger was past, and Rhoda's teeth were chattering as if from cold, in spite of the warm sun bathing them in hot, kind light.

"Oh, dear! wasn't it dreadful? And all so sudden, too!" said Rhoda. "I never saw it coming till Vi called out. Our train has gone on; of course, it was waiting for that express—we might have known."

"It is so easy to be clever afterwards," replied Patricia, looking round curiously. "The question is—where are we, how many miles from home, and in what part of the world? If we had been dropped from the skies it could not be more bewildering."

They scrambled down a bank into a field, and shook the dust of the line off their feet. Part of the bank, which was loose and sandy, came with them, filling their slippers with pebbles.

"I wish I had put on my boots," said Rhoda, "I expect we shall have to walk all the way home like tramps, and they won't recognise us when we get back, for it will probably take two or three days."

"What a dear little stream! I'm so thirsty," declared Violet, "I really must have a drink."

She threw herself down on the grass, and put her lips to the sparkling water.

Patricia could not resist giving her just the tiniest little push, only enough to wet her face.

"I call that horrid of you!" she gasped, sitting up with her eyes and nose full of water, and her fringe looking as if it had been dipped in morning dew. "Nice gratitude when I've just saved your life!"

"Adorable Violet, I'm frightfully sorry! The devil entered into me, and it was so tempting! Besides, your face needed washing, it had railway smuts; and now you look much fresher. Hulloo, Rhoda, what are you eating?"

"Watercresses—have some? You must imagine the bread-and-butter, and it is all the tea we shall get. Oh! dear, tea! We had ordered such a good one at home for your benefit, Patricia."

"What a shame to tell me just now! I say,



They looked back
saw a stout m
waving a sti

in view of our long journey home, shall we take off our shoes and stockings and paddle?"

The idea instantly met with favour. A moment later the three girls were wading in the cool water, almost forgetting their troubles in this new-found delight. But Violet reminded them that time was precious, and set the good example of drying her feet in the warm grass and drawing on her stockings.

"I feel like a lion refreshed," she said.

"So do I," chimed in Patricia. "Now we will go on our way rejoicing, and trust in our good fortune to take us home safely."

"Look," said Rhoda, as they started off across the field, "*trespassers will be prosecuted.*"

"I did not see the board before, and we have not only been trespassing, but pulling the watercresses and paddling in the stream."

"Well, we did not do any harm; I am sure no one would mind."

As Patricia spoke a shout reached them.

"Hi, there! What are you doing in my field?"

The girls turned back and saw a stout man hurrying towards them, waving a stick.

"I don't know," said Rhoda, "it would be so much fun if he chased us. What fun!



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"Let us run," said Rhoda, "it would be so amusing. Perhaps he will chase us. What fun!"

She started off at a brisk trot, Violet and Patricia following.

The stout man came in hot pursuit, and it was not till they had reached a gate at the far end and vaulted over it, that they paused to consider their hasty determination.

"It wasn't at all nice of us to run," said Patricia ; "we must wait here and apologise."

There was plenty of time to escape, but instead they grouped themselves by the gate and watched for the stout farmer. Their cheeks were flushed from the exercise, and a very pretty trio they looked, their eyes sparkling with merriment, their lips smiling in spite of serious efforts to keep grave.

"Don't hurry ; oh ! please, don't hurry," they cried, really distressed to see him so hot. "We are not going to run away again, we only did it for fun. Do forgive us, we are very sorry !"

The man was too breathless to speak for the moment, but he stared surprised at the three pretty girls, and seeing they were hatless supposed them to be visitors at the big house over the way.

"I beg your pardon, ladies," he said, "I thought as it was some girls from the village, being short-sighted myself. They comes after

the cresses, and takes 'em away in basket-loads to sell at the markets."

"We picked some of your watercresses to eat, because we are missing our tea to-day, but only a very few," said Patricia.

"Oh! that don't matter, Missy. I'll send you a bunch in to breakfast to-morrow, if you care for the things."

"Thank you very much," she replied, restraining a smile and frowning at Rhoda, who almost laughed. "It is so nice of you not to be angry."

She bowed and turned away, followed by the sisters, while the farmer retired, hat in hand, to pick the promised watercresses.

"I wonder who he thought we were?" she said. "What adventures we are having! Let us stick to the road now, then no one can accuse us of trespassing. I really feel as if we were destined to break laws to-day. We've travelled without tickets, stolen watercresses, trespassed, and done everything we ought not to do. I hope some awful judgment will not fall upon our heads."

"Do you know," said Violet, "it is nearly half an hour since we got out of that train, and we are no nearer finding our way home than we were then!"

"What a dreadful thought," sighed Patricia ;
"we really must try to be more practical.
Half an hour wasted, actually thrown away—
thirty precious minutes of our valuable time.
If we are not home before dinner father will be
frantic, and as to Fraülein Parbs, I dare not
think of her displeasure!"

"Come," said Rhoda, "put your best foot
forward."

"Stop, stop," cried Violet, "how do you
know you are not walking in the wrong direc-
tion? Oh! if only we could get some sort of
a conveyance!"

"There is no 'if' about it," retorted Patricia,
"we *must*! I've no mind to be benighted
and sleep under a hedge. Let us make for the
village—keep up your spirits, girls. 'Where
there's a will there's a way.' I've got the will,
and this is the way—quick march!"

CHAPTER V

QUEER ADVENTURES

IT was not far to the village, and the three wanderers soon found themselves in a busy market-place, where cattle, fowls, pigs, goats, sheep, and rabbits were being sold.

All the neighbouring farmers had driven in with their wares, some coming to buy or sell from long distances. The place had such an air of life, movement, and bustle that it quite rejoiced the girls' hearts, filling them with pleasurable curiosity.

"What darling doves," cried Rhoda. "Oh! I wish I had some money with me. I've been wanting a pair of doves for ages, their coo is so soothing. Do you think the man would trust me if I promised to send the money by post?"

"My dear Rhoda, have we not responsibilities enough without saddling ourselves with

two birds in a cage?" said Violet. We don't know when we shall get home, and the doves might die on the way from hunger or thirst. At least we are luggageless and unhampered now; for goodness' sake let us remain so!"

Rhoda's face fell, and Patricia was touched at the sight of her disappointment.

"I don't see why she shouldn't have them, Vi," Patricia interceded. "They are not likely to starve with plenty of grain in the cage, and we can take it in turns to carry the basket."

The three hatless girls were attracting attention as they flitted about amongst the animals, stroking the sheep in their pens and making friends with the stout pigs, who put up their noses to be scratched. The owner of the doves overhearing part of the conversation, pounced upon Rhoda as a possible customer.

"I should like the doves very much," she said, with a perplexed little air, "but unfortunately I have no money with me. I would post it to-morrow if you are willing to take my word, but of course I'm a stranger, so can hardly expect——" She was getting rather red and confused, when the man interrupted her.

"Where do you live, Miss?"

"At Lewis Park, Lewisbourne."

"Lewis Park," he said; "let me see, I've been through Lewisbourne many a time to Farmer Brown's place. Now you come to mention it, I've heard of your house: it's inside them big gates past the 'Red Lion.'"

"Oh! do you know Farmer Brown?" asked Rhoda, her eyes brightening, "and is he here to-day by any chance?"

"No, Miss, but he's sent a man over with a cart to fetch away some sheep. The fellow ought to have left an hour ago, but he's a new hand at Farmer Brown's, and a bit racketty. He's spent the best part of his day in the 'Prince Albert' yonder. Ah! there he comes."

"Hurrah!" cried Rhoda, "and with one of Farmer Brown's carts! I should know it anywhere, because the wheels are painted such a funny colour. It will just do to take us home. What a piece of luck!"

She was running towards it, when the bird-seller stopped her.

"You can take the doves, Miss, and welcome. These are the best pair you'd buy anywhere, I'd stake my oath on that."

"Oh! thank you, thank you." She seized the cage eagerly, as Violet, who was much in

love with a dear little calf, turned and caught sight of her hurrying away with her burden.

"Patricia, just look at that child! She's managed to get her doves, and I don't know how we shall cart them back. She is quite mad. See! she's talking to that dreadful man with the very red face. I don't like his appearance at all. Let us go and take her away."

"Oh! here you are at last!" cried Rhoda, as the other two joined her. "I could not think what had become of you. Is it not fortunate?—there's a cart of Farmer Brown's here, this one with the sheep in it, and I've booked three seats on the box. It will be a fearful squeeze, but we can't help that, and it would not do to get inside and inconvenience the poor sheep. You are starting now, are you not?" turning to the man, who with some difficulty lurched himself on the cart.

"Yes, I be startin' at once," he replied, in a thick, guttural voice.

"That man is drunk," whispered Patricia, "but beggars cannot be choosers, and it is too far to walk. We shall be late enough as it is. Here, Rhoda, give me the doves, and I'll hand them to you when you're up. It is not so bad as getting into the train from the line, anyhow."

In another minute they were packed on the box, sitting as close together as possible, and edging away from the man, giving him plenty of elbow room.

"Goo on!" he shouted, hitting the horse with a long stick.

It started so jerkily that the girls nearly slipped off the narrow seat, and the doves were for the moment in serious danger of a fall. The sheep bleated piteously, as if protesting against such roughness; then they were all, girls, animals, and birds, clattering along the country roads, jolting painfully over stones and ruts.

"I wish this cart had springs," sighed Violet, "it's making my back ache already. We shall get our teeth permanently loosened if we have many hours of this sort of going."

"He can't drive a bit," whispered Patricia; "look how funnily he holds the reins. I'm afraid to talk to him; his eyes roll so dreadfully. Did you ever see such queer, bloodshot eyes?"

As she spoke the driver began singing and flourishing his whip. The words of the song were quite unintelligible, while the horse went from one side of the road to the other with an utter disregard of rules and regulations.

• "Take care!" cried Patricia, "you'll have us in the ditch."

The man grunted a reply, and moody silence followed his hilarity. For some miles they jogged along, while the monotony and fatigue began to tell on their spirits.

"I'm so tired," said Dora.

"And I'm so hungry," sighed Violet.

"And I'm both," added Patricia. She was leaning back scratching a sleepy sheep. "See, I've comforted this poor thing. She has settled down quite happily," pointing to the animal. "I believe I have mesmerised her. Oh! dear, you've upset the doves' water now, Rhoda, and it's trickling down your skirt; a nice mess you'll be in by the time we get back—if we ever do get back!"

This was added doubtfully, for their driver seemed growing drowsy, and more than once they had been obliged to wake him from an impromptu nap. This was not an easy undertaking, and needed considerable tact. Patricia accomplished it twice, by pretending to knock his elbow accidentally, and then apologising in a loud voice.

"Are you ill?" asked Rhoda, as a groan from their unpleasant companion broke a long silence.

"No, I'm all right," he replied, jaggng the horse's mouth, "but now and agin I come over a bit dizzy. It be rare thirsty weather; we'll just rest awhile here at the 'Yellow Dog.' Hold the reins, will you, Miss? I won't be more than a minute."

He had drawn up in front of a wayside tavern, and clumsily jumped to the ground. Patricia took the reins, and noticed he walked unsteadily as he entered the inn.

"We shall have trouble yet with that man," she said, "especially now he is going to drink again. I wish we could have stopped him. I've a good mind to drive on and leave him in the lurch, but that would hardly be fair, since he has befriended us. I don't think Farmer Brown can know what a very odd creature he has entrusted his sheep to. It is really most fortunate for Farmer Brown that we are here to keep guard. That man would have left these poor animals outside all alone, you may be sure, and anything might have happened."

Now that the conveyance was in her charge, Patricia felt singularly important. This unconventional driving tour took a fresh aspect.

"Perhaps it was Farmer Brown's good angel made all this happen," she continued. "You may depend we were sent on purpose. There

is a reason in everything if we only look for it."

So Patricia improved the occasion by turning philosopher, and as her idea appealed to the sisters, they passed the time chatting merrily, until their driver reappeared.

"Here comes our 'Trial,'" said Patricia, "and oh! look, he is taken worse. What shall we do?"

He staggered through the door, followed by an expostulating landlord.

"You've not paid, young man, and you don't go until you do," said the worthy proprietor, justly indignant. "We don't keep our bar open for amusement, nor do we give liquor on tick; so you'd better pay up sharp, or it will be the worse for you."

"Get along," muttered the driver, pushing his assailant aside. "I've spent enough money to-day without your coming worrying."

The landlord caught him by the arm, but with an effort he wrenched himself free, at the same moment lurching into a navvy who was smoking a pipe outside. The navvy, being bad tempered, resented this unintentional push, and repaid it with interest. Words came to blows, and a desperate fight ensued.

The sight appalled the three girls, filling

them with such terror they could hardly keep from screaming, while Rhoda, in her alarm, pinched Patricia's arm black and blue, and Violet hid her face saying : " Tell me when it is all over."

" The ' Trial,' poor fellow, has been knocked down," said Patricia, " and his face is cut and bleeding. He won't get up. Do look, Violet, he has rolled himself into the shape of a comma, and announced his intention of spending the night in the ditch. He is one mass of dust, and promises to pay in the morning if only they will let him be. I will call the landlord and ask what we had better do."

In a few words Patricia explained the situation to the proprietor of the " Yellow Dog," told him where his unruly customer came from, and asked advice.

" If you can drive, Miss, you had better go back by yourselves; we'll look after that gentleman," pointing to the fallen victim, " and you'll get on a deal better without his company."

" Oh! may we?" said Patricia; " how delightful—or do you think you could put him in at the back with the sheep?"

" No; I'd be sorry for the sheep," he said, laughing.

"I don't know the way," Patricia replied. "Can you tell me the nearest road to Lewisbourne?"

The proprietor entered into a lengthy description of the route, which he chiefly indicated by various taverns, given as landmarks.

At first Patricia felt a little bewildered, and was obliged to ask him "to repeat it all over again."

This he did, slowly and more plainly.

"Can you remember?" she said, turning to Violet and Rhoda; "three heads are better than one—so try to recollect."

"I think I know," replied Violet, "and Rhoda has a wonderful memory. Goodbye," turning to their new found friend, "we are so much obliged to you for all your kindness."

They took a last look at the "Trial," who had fallen into a heavy sleep, and drove away feeling most delightfully independent.

"It is much more comfortable now, isn't it?" said Rhoda; "and how well Patricia drives. We are not nearly so cramped, and it is such a relief to go straight instead of swerving all over the road."

"I never thought we should get a cart and horse all to ourselves," Violet sighed



The three girls drove gaily along the green lanes.

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contentedly. "We shall drive in state into Lewisbourne, chaperoning these dear sheep, and accompanied by bleating and the cooing of doves!"

"It's a real triumph!" Patricia declared; "but all the same I am rather in dread of our reception. We can't be home before nine o'clock if everything goes right, and we do not lose our way. One cannot tell what might happen between now and then!"

"Don't anticipate evils. We luckily have nothing to fear from highwaymen or robbers; since there isn't a purse between us."

So with their fears calmed and their minds for the moment at rest, the three girls drove gaily along the green lanes, sometimes singing, sometimes talking, and then silently watching the glorious sunset that mirrored itself before them, bright and beautiful, like a good omen for the future.

CHAPTER VI

HOME-COMING

IF my readers expect me to describe the scene of confusion at Lewis Park when it was first discovered the three girls were missing, let me warn them at once this is not my intention. No words could adequately paint the intense consternation, the running hither and thither of excited servants, the extreme anxiety of the parents, and the various suggestions made as to this mysterious disappearance. That none, unlikely though they proved, were more improbable than what had actually taken place is not difficult to believe, for who would credit so wild an action as Patricia's on that eventful afternoon? Who, with any respect for Violet and Rhoda's good sense, would dream of their following a visitor hatless into a chance train pausing on the line?

So the search flagged not with the closing

in of day, gathering darkness only increasing the fears of the household and adding fresh tragedy and flights of imagination to the awed whispers of servants, who instantly jumped at the most disastrous conclusions.

"It's my belief," said the butler, in a confidential undertone to the footman, "that we shall never see them back alive. They've come to some desperate harm sending no message, and stopping out till past nine! Miss Rhoda and Miss Violet wouldn't miss tea and supper running for nothing, you mark my words. If they were living, depend upon it, their appetites would have brought them back before now. But there! it goes to my heart to see master and mistress that distressed! Then we've poor Mr. Iven, rushing about with a face like a sheet, white and scared and worried—for the young lady is his only child, and he's a widower too. It's a bad day's business, James, and there's worse coming."

But in spite of this pessimism and the doleful prophecies which the butler proceeded to whisper into the ears of all his fellow-servants, an hour came when the lodge-keeper—a willing herald—ran, panting and breathless, up the drive to pour forth good news. . He

out-paced the tired pony, and was so overcome by the speed of his racing that for the moment he could not speak.

"You have news?" cried the distracted parents.

He put his hand over his heart to still its palpitating, and signified yes by a movement of his head.

"They're coming!" he exclaimed, on regaining his breath. "Miss Violet and Miss Rhoda with the other young lady!"

"Are they safe and sound?"

"Yes; God bless them!" replied the old retainer, baring his head reverently as he spoke; "and they're driving a cart full of cattle, for I saw the creatures moving, though it was too dark to put a name to them!"

The sound of wheels corroborated his statement, and a moment later the weary children, stiff from long hours of jolting on the cramped seat, were lifted down by thankful arms. A glance at them revealed their tired condition—for it was now past ten, and they had fasted since lunch.

Dusty, dishevelled, sleepy, they endeavoured to explain their conduct, each breaking in upon the other till the parents became mightily confused.

"I think you had better have your supper now, and tell us your long story afterwards ; for though we're very angry, we are not going to scold you till to-morrow. It appears you jumped in a train, were carried away, and lost yourselves entirely ; that you have come back in Farmer Brown's cart, and Farmer Brown is waiting for his sheep, which ought to have arrived hours ago."

"We missed the turning," said Patricia ; "it was so dark, and we had no lights. A poor man on a bicycle charged into us, and broke his machine to pieces. We were so sorry for him ! He seemed dreadfully put out, and asked for our names and addresses. He said we ought to have had lamps."

"But I can't understand the train business," said Mr. Iven. "What were you doing at the station ?"

With penitential blushes Patricia confessed her folly, and watched the shocked look on the faces of the elders, as the truth was made clear to them. She felt at last how rash and foolhardy her error of judgment had been, especially with the flash-light of paternal wisdom turned full upon it.

All three girls stood convicted by their own consciences as they listened to the trouble they

had caused, and saw how inconsiderate their conduct appeared.

"Oh, mother, did you really cry?" whispered Violet, flinging her arms round the dear neck of that best of parents; "and haven't you had your dinner yet—were you too frightened to eat?"

"Can you wonder, children? Fancy how I felt when it got dark, and still we could hear nothing. Poor papa was quite distracted; I could say nothing to console him."

"We'll never, never get taken away again, if you will forgive us this once. It's so awful to feel we made you unhappy—I think that is worse than any punishment," said Rhoda, wiping a stray tear from her eye. "And mother, darling, I have brought you two beautiful doves, in a big wicker cage; you shall have them for your very own, to make up for this horrid night."

"You had better make a good meal, my naughty Patricia," said Mr. Iven, "and drink a glass of wine, for you have another drive before you yet, and you look fagged out already."

"What are we going home in?" she asked.

"The dogcart. It arrived at six o'clock this evening."

"I wonder if Fraülein will be sitting up. How shall I ever tell her about to-day. It's such a long, long story. We can take the puppy, can't we, father? I'll carry him in my arms."

"No," said Mr. Iven, "that must be the penalty for your sins, young woman. It won't do to let you off scot free."

"Isn't Patricia to have the dog?" cried Rhoda.

"I think not," replied her father.

"But she will be so disappointed," said Violet, glancing at him imploringly.

He looked across at Patricia, expecting her to plead, but she said nothing, accepting her fate with resignation; only he noticed her lips twitched as if she were trying not to cry, and then a few tell-tale tears obtruded themselves upon her lashes. But she checked these with an effort, commendable considering her fatigue.

The sight of the silent struggle touched Mr. Iven, though Patricia had no idea that he saw her effort.

The three girls nearly fell asleep over their supper in spite of being so hungry, and the sisters were quite sorry to think of Patricia starting off again.

Mr. Iven refused an invitation for her to

stop the night, saying she had led her companions into mischief enough already, and prolonged their visit unconscionably. The dogcart was at the door, and Mr. Iven lifted his sleepy little girl into the seat beside him, gathered up the reins, and drove away. Patricia closed her eyes—it had been a very long day! Was it really only that same morning she had left Thames Bank, followed by Fraülein's frown, by the excited cheering of Hetty, Betty, and Tom? She thought of the "Trial" with his cut face and torn clothes, as she had last seen him, wondering if his bruises would be very painful in the morning. It was a great rest to Patricia not having to drive, and the dogcart was so well balanced it did not jolt her like Farmer Brown's. She was just dozing off into the most delicious of naps when she woke with a start and a little cry.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Iven.

"I felt something move under my feet—I know I did."

"Nonsense! you must have been dreaming."

He flicked the horse lightly with his whip, and dismissed the subject.

"I suppose I was mistaken," thought Patricia, "but it's very odd, for I was quite certain at the moment."

Again her heavy lids dropped, and this time, although she was sitting upright, she lost consciousness, and had a dreadful dream. She fancied she heard once more the rush of the awful express that so nearly cut them down on the line, the hot breath of the engine fanned her cheek and brought great drops of terror upon her forehead. Then she looked wildly round for Rhoda and Violet—they were both missing! The train still whirled before her vision, and she knew they had fallen beneath its destroying wheels. The agony of everlasting remorse surged into her soul; she tried to scream, to articulate, but her power of speech had gone. With a struggle she awoke, almost falling from her high seat as she did so.

“Take care!” said Mr. Iven; “don’t topple out.”

“I had such a horrid dream,” she replied.

“Late supper, and eating fast. We shall soon be home, and you had better try to keep awake.”

“Father, father!”

“Yes.”

“Something touched my leg again—really, truly; it was no fancy! There *is* something under the seat”—bending down and feeling with her hand—“a big basket, and it’s mov-

ing. Yes, the basket is moving; how very odd!"

"Pull it out and see," said Mr. Iven. It was too dark for Patricia to notice he was smiling.

She obeyed.

"Oh, dear! the lid's come off, and, would you believe it, my little dog's inside, the one you said I wasn't to have?"

"Well, perhaps I changed my mind; and shall I tell you the reason? It was because you didn't make a fuss, although you were disappointed. If you had said one word I should not have relented. You knew you deserved a punishment."

"Oh," broke in Patricia, "how perfectly delightful! Is he really mine after all?"

"Yes."

"It's too good of you," she said, nestling up against her father and holding the puppy tight in her arms. "He is such a dear little dog, and I had set my heart on him. Look, he is trying to lick my face; he loves me already. He has such a funny, ugly mouth."

Patricia was wide awake now. She was far too taken up with her new treasure to doze again, and the moments flew rapidly till the lights of Thames Bank were sighted.

"Do you think," she whispered, edging a little closer to her father—"do you think I need tell Fraülein Parbs anything about it? She is so deaf in one ear, and there is the bicycle score still to be made up. I shall have to do extra lessons for that to-morrow."

"Oh, bother Fraülein Parbs!" said Mr. Iven, "we really can't account to her for our time. She isn't at all the sort of woman I expected to find, but it is such a worry changing. You must see how you get on with her, and let me know."

Patricia gave a sigh of relief.

Fraülein greeted her with black looks as she bounded into the schoolroom, holding her bulldog puppy.

"Vy are you so late?" Fraülein asked; "it is long past your bed hour. And to whom belongs that dreadful dog?"

"To me; he's my very own, bless him!" said Patricia, kissing her darling's nose.

"Ah! vat dirty tricks! You must not kiss 'im vit your lips, it is most un'healthy."

Patricia deposited her burden on the floor. He wagged his tail, and advanced with friendly intentions towards Fraülein.

She shook her handkerchief at the well-meaning puppy, and cried, "Shoo! shoo! go

"You can't jump!" she said angrily, pulling her back on the seat, "you will upset the boat. For goodness' sake keep calm and wait a moment." The sail swung round, and the mast caught in the bough of a tree. "Now we are in a pretty mess, I don't know how I shall ever get clear of these trees!" Patricia continued, with difficulty letting down her sail.

"Can we help you?" cried two cheery voices from the island.

Patricia looked up.

"Hulloa, Rhoda and Violet, is that you? What a good thing—I'm in such a fix!"

"Wait a minute," said Violet, "I'll get our boat-hook and draw you in against the shore."

A second later, with the aid of her two friends, Patricia succeeded in extricating the mast and depositing Fraülein on the island.

That terrified lady muttered a prayer of thankfulness, and sank on the bank fanning herself with her pocket-handkerchief.

"Do you feel better?" asked Patricia.

"Oh! 'ow my 'eart does beat! I go no more vit you in dat boat. I might 'ave known you would be up to your tricks—I never trust you again—never!"

"It's no good trying to explain," said Patricia in an aside to Rhoda and Violet.

"She's so dreadfully pigheaded. Is this your new boat? It looks a jolly safe one!"

"Yes, but she's smart, isn't she, with her beautiful new cushions and paint? Mother is rather nervous of our going on the river alone, because we haven't been used to it all our lives like you. We may not go through the lock, and she likes us to keep pretty near the boat-house. We both swim."

"I don't know how I am to get Fraülein home, as I have no sculls or paddle, and she won't sail. It was so humiliating when she screamed; I saw that party in the white electric launch all laughing at her—I felt such a fool!"

"We had better row her back."

"It's awfully good of you. I'll sail on and order tea, for you will come and have tea with me, won't you?"

"Thanks, we should like to very much; we brought a bag of buns in the boat, but thought we would not bother about a kettle, it is such an awkward thing to carry when you are bicycling. We were just beginning to feel rather thirsty."

"Then let us go home at once. I will tell Fraülein your proposal; I'm sure she will be immensely grateful."

"This is better, far better," said Fraülein

Parbs, as the three girls settled her comfortably in the stern of the new boat.

Rhoda and Violet were swift oarswomen, and the wind proving capricious, they arrived in advance of Patricia at Thames Bank.

"Goodbye," said Fraülein, as they assisted her to land.

She evidently expected them to go, but Violet paved the way to their remaining.

"We will wait here till Patricia comes," she said, "but do not let us keep you."

"No, I go to the 'ouse, but tell Patricia ven she arrives to come in at once to tea. I pray you not to detain her in conversation. She is very thoughtless, and I am 'ungry."

"You are thoughtless too," whispered Rhoda after the retreating figure. "You don't intend us to share your meal, that's plain."

"Hush! she might hear you," said Violet.

"I call her a very disagreeable old woman. She never even said thank you to us for rowing her home, and I don't like the way she speaks to Patricia, it is not at all nice. How different to our dear Miss Maurice!"

"You beat me," cried a voice from the sailing-boat. "A hull came in the wind. I am afraid I've kept you waiting for tea. Tie up your boat and come ashore."

"I think we had better not come to tea; Fraülein said nothing about it, and pointedly remarked we were to send you in. She wished us 'goodbye' most finally!"

"Oh, rubbish! I can always ask any friends I like to tea. Please don't annoy me by refusing. I shall be simply wild with Fraülein if you let her drive you away."

"All right, we'll face the worst," said Violet. "Come along, Rhoda."

As the girls went upstairs to wash their hands they met Jane.

"Lay tea for four," said Patricia, "and bring up the cake and jam."

"Yes, Miss," replied Jane, hurrying to do her bidding.

"Vy do you bring four cups?" asked Fraülein a few moments later.

"Because there are two young ladies coming to tea," answered Jane pleasantly—"Miss Rhoda and Violet from Lewis Park."

"But I did not invite them, and Miss Patricia has no right to do so without asking my permission. Take away ze two extra cups; she shall learn to consult my vishes first before her own."

Jane hesitated.

"Do as I tell you—vat you vait for?"

"Miss Patricia has always been accustomed to ask her friends, and——"

"*Ruhig*—ah! you don't understand—vat is it you say in English?—shut up, quiet yourself. I will have my orders obeyed."

Jane left with a shrug of her shoulders, taking the two cups regretfully back to the pantry.

Presently the three girls came smiling in.

"Oh! how stupid of Jane!" cried Patricia; "she has forgotten to lay for Rhoda and Violet."

"You have been *sehr unartig*, Patricia; it is your penalty. I cannot permit you to entertain your guests this afternoon."

Rhoda and Violet looked dreadfully uncomfortable, but Patricia grew crimson with wrathful indignation. Her sense of hospitality was outraged; besides this she knew that *Fräulein* was acting against all the canons of good taste.

She crossed the room with steady, even steps that portrayed determination, and rang the bell loudly.

"What are you ringing for, impertinent girl? You should ask me before you ring."

"I want two more cups," said Patricia. "I can't think how you dare behave so insultingly to Rhoda and Violet in my house!"

"Dare! a fine word to use," hissed Fraulein, her voice vibrating through her long, wolf-like teeth. "You say dare to me—*me*, your governess!"

Patricia wheeled round and confronted her foe; they stood face to face, woman and girl, each in a fury with the other, while Violet and Rhoda held their breath.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WATER-RATS

“**Y**OU do as I tell you,” said Fraülein. “I stand no nonsense!”

“No, perhaps not,” replied Patricia, “but I’ve stood it long enough, and this is past a joke. You think, just because I have not a mother or any one to appeal to, that you are going to treat me like a baby. I’ve been brought up differently to that, and if father were at home——”

“You have been brought up very badly, I know well; and don’t you think, Patricia, that it make it very bad for you to show this evil temper before your friends?”

“I think it’s positively disgraceful of you to treat them in this hateful way—just wait till Jane comes, she will tell you whether I am allowed to ask them to tea or not.”

The door opened as she spoke.

"I ordered tea for four," said Patricia, with the calmness of desperation. Her flushed cheeks had gone pale now, pale with passion, and Jane stood watching her pityingly, for Patricia was a favourite with all the servants.

"Yes, Miss," answered the maid staunchly, "and Fraülein objected. I have taken the liberty of laying tea in the dining-room for you and your visitors, as Fraülein did not care to be disturbed."

"Thank you, Jane," she replied, a little gasping sigh of relief accompanying the words. "Come, Violet—come, Rhoda!"

Patricia went quickly to the door as she spoke, followed by her friends, while Jane stood back to let them pass.

Fraülein saw she had lost ground, and, speechless with rage and amazement, glared at the retreating figures, like the bad fairy in a book.

"So," she muttered, as the door closed, "dat is how I am to be treated, is it? This Patricia is a bigger 'andful than I thought; there is no 'olding 'er! She 'as the unruly will, the bad 'eart, the real wickedness! She get more unmanageable every day. She make no progress, except the progress of badness. Vell, as she form her own bed, so must she sleep

upon it. For three days she shall be kept in, and do extra work with diligence, and on Saturday—no 'alf-'oliday! Then we see if she gives 'er parties without the consent of Fraülein Parbs."

Thus soliloquising, Patricia's stern instructress settled down to her solitary tea, grudging the girls their merrier meal below, where, free from constraint, they discussed the situation fully.

"Of course I know I lost my temper," said Patricia, as she poured out her guests' much-disputed tea, "but wasn't I provoked? Could flesh and blood help an outburst at such unfair treatment? Oh! I wanted to say such awful things, they kept coming into my mind, and bubbling up till I thought I must have shrieked them at her!"

"I can't think how you manage to live with such an ogre," said Violet. "I should expire on the spot! Is she always so disagreeable?"

"Oh! yes, worse sometimes; this is one of her average days. I am getting used to it for myself, but when it falls on my friends and affects them I can't stand it at any price. You should have had your tea, if I'd been obliged to fight over the very teapot. Picture me grasping the handle, Fraülein holding the spout, and a tug of war ensuing!"

The idea was so ludicrous, it set them all off laughing, and Jane, passing outside at that moment, remarked to a fellow-servant: "Miss Patricia was quite herself again, and a good job too, since she was worth ten of that there *Fraülein*!"

"Now you see what a depressing atmosphere I live in," said Patricia, "you must often come and cheer me up."

The girls exchanged glances, for under the circumstances it was not very pleasant to visit Patricia and create disturbances.

Patricia's quick insight divined their thoughts. "I know what you are thinking—you don't want to encounter *Fraülein*'s warm welcome. It might be a little too warm like to-day! But I've a scheme in my head that has been coming by degrees—a scheme about a club."

"A club!"

"Yes, all women have their clubs nowadays, so why not girls? My idea is to start a little boating club, just between ourselves, and ask a few friends to join. There are some girls on the big house-boat, and a nice family at St. Clement's, they've got a launch and two Canadian canoes. We three might be the working committee, and organise regattas and things."

"It sounds lovely ; but what about a club-house?"

"Oh! I haven't forgotten that. You know our summer-house built out over the boat-house at the end of the garden? Well, it has been painted and done up for the summer. Father said it was to be my special domain, that was what made me first think of a club. There are steps down to the river, so it is just the place for a boating club."

"Glorious!" cried Rhoda. "But we must have colours and a name. You shall be the president, Patricia, and we'll have no end of a good time away from Fraülein."

"Yes, you see, I could meet my friends there, and get Jane to bring tea or refreshments out to us. We will tell Jane all about it ; she's a brick, and will do anything for me. Of course Fraülein won't be a member, and if she should try to push in, or put up her name for election, I shall black ball her directly."

"What can we call ourselves?" asked Violet.
"It must be something original."

"The only appropriate name I can think of" said Patricia, "is the 'Water Rats'?"

"Why 'Water Rats'?"

"Because just under our club-room is a perfect home for them. They are such dear

little furry things, and sometimes they sit out by the steps sunning themselves. I nearly always hear a little splash when I come up quietly. I love to see them dive down into their holes. I was so angry with old 'Scratch-up' because he killed a lot the other day. I told him never to do it again. 'Bully' is nearly as bad as 'Scratch-up'—he's always after the water-rats."

She called her bull-pup, and gave him a basin of milk.

"He is such a darling," she said, "and follows me everywhere, but Fraülein has never got over her dislike for him. He puts his tail between his legs and runs away whenever she comes in sight. She either flourishes her umbrella at him, or makes the most dreadful sounds in her throat, for fear he should jump up. He wades a good deal in the stream, and makes his paws wet. Fraülein still persists in calling him vicious, though he is the best-tempered animal in the world ; you should see him playing with Hetty, Betty, and Tom."

"How are your three children?" asked Rhoda.

"Very well, thank you. I am having three little red bathing dresses made for them, because I want to teach them to swim. They

are always playing in the garden, and might fall in the river any day. 'Scratch-up' has made me a sort of fishing-rod, composed of a rope fastened to the end of a boat-hook. I shall fasten this rope round their waists, and drop them in, while I hold them up from the punt."

"What fun! Do let us be present at the operation."

"Certainly," said Patricia; "and don't you think swimming might be one of the features of our club?—all water-rats swim, and those who like it can use the club-room in the early morning as a bathing-machine."

"Really, Patricia, your ideas are colossal! The club ought to be a success with you at its head."

"There is nothing like doing things at once," said Patricia; "I hate dawdling about thinking it over and not acting. Suppose we start the club to-night? I am free till seven, and I don't mean to show my face to Fraülein a moment before—quite time enough then to get my head snapped off. We will choose a select few, just special friends for a beginning, and go round now and ask them to become 'Water-Rats.' Here is half a sheet of paper, and I've got a pencil in my pocket,

so it will just do for our list of members. Shall we fix next Saturday for a regatta—of course not a big one—say half a dozen races? To day's Monday, so we've heaps of time to practice and go into training if we like. I'll write to father and ask him to send some prizes from town; he is rather good at that sort of thing, and is sure to buy nice ones."

Rhoda and Violet fell in joyfully with Patricia's proposal. Saturday would suit them down to the ground.

"We must have a punting race, a canoeing race, sculling and rowing," they said. "I think every member ought to bring some contribution towards the tea, and make it a picnic meal. There will be a lot to settle; let us start off at once."

"We'll send Jane upstairs for our hats," said Patricia, "or Fraülein may pounce on us, and I don't want you insulted again. Besides, I've just got my temper back, and it's a most unpleasant thing to lose, especially in hot weather; it takes it out of one more than rowing or any sort of exercise."

The girls went gaily on their mission, talking of "clubland," and feeling elated at the prospect of organising a band of "Water-Rats" to sport upon the sunny Thames.

Their friends eagerly accepted the invitation to join, declaring themselves ready for any fun that was going. They knew if Patricia was in it the plan must succeed. Patricia had such a way of making things jolly, and her popularity with girls was indisputable.

She returned to Thames Bank with the members she had collected, to inspect the club premises and talk over future events.

A programme of races for Saturday was drawn out, and names entered of competitors. Patricia's methods were certainly prompt, for between five and seven o'clock she had made the "Water-Rats" an established fact, a going concern.

The members eventually took their leave; they would have talked on till midnight had not various attendants arrived to escort them home. Patricia watched them go with a sinking heart—she positively dreaded meeting Fraülein.

"Think of me at supper," she whispered to Violet. "Sha'n't I be in congenial company, *tête-à-tête* with the Wolf?"

"You go in for animals," Violet replied, "but I certainly think water-rats are preferable myself."

Patricia walked slowly back to the house,

and crept on tip-toe to the schoolroom door, pushing it open gently. She found Fraülein in a sulky mood. She handed Patricia her evening's preparation without a word.

In gloomy silence the girl wrote a French exercise, committed a German poem to memory, and translated two fables.

"Oh dear!" she sighed, "I'm so tired of working!"

"You 'ave a deal too much pleasure," Fraülein vouchsafed; "yours is a vicked, vorldly nature. I tremble to think vat you vill be in time."

"Father likes me to enjoy myself; he has never called me worldly or wicked."

"Go on, Patricia, argue — argue *immer*. Every vord increase your punishment. I do not overlook to-day, you exasperated me; I vas quite ill; I put eau de Cologne on my forehead and take a liver pill!"

"I hope," said Patricia, quite seriously and earnestly, "that it did you good."

"Ah! you jibe at me, you say dat to make sport! Be silent now, and if you speak for ten minutes by de clock I give you three more exercises before supper."

Patricia had no wish to talk since everything she said was misconstrued; so, putting away

her lesson books, she wrote her father a long letter about the "Water-Rats," and asked him to send some nice prizes as soon as possible.

"If you could get a clockwork mouse or rat for a consolation prize I should be very glad," she added in a postscript.

"You write to your father?" queried Fraülein, contracting her eyebrows.

"Yes."

"You complain of me to 'im? you say all sorts of 'orrid things about poor Fraülein?"

"I have not mentioned you," replied Patricia; "this letter is on a much more pleasant subject."

"Ah! your tongue—your tongue! vat a scourge it is! Always an answer ready!"

Patricia sighed and folded her letter wearily.

"At least I won't worry father," she thought.

CHAPTER IX

TRAPPED

GREAT excitement prevailed among the "Water-Rats" in view of their first regatta. The most fascinating prizes had arrived from London, with a letter from Mr. Iven formally wishing the club every success, and regretting that he would be unable to attend on Saturday afternoon.

This missive was read out by Patricia at a committee meeting. As all the members of this rising club were on the committee, Mr. Iven's support and goodwill was thus made known to the entire community of "Water-Rats."

So far, there was not a discordant spirit among the members. Good fellowship reigned supreme, and this, I cannot help thinking, was due in a great measure to their president's tact.

Patricia got her own way without appearing

to thwart. She surpassed herself in the art of oratory ; her speeches were met with increased enthusiasm at every meeting of this happy little band. Strangely enough throughout the week Fraülein had not so much as suspected the existence of the "Water-Rats," much less their intrusions in the summer-house by the river. They congregated much like their namesakes, in unseen hordes on the banks of the Thames, and had they been plotting some deadly anarchy instead of a harmless Saturday afternoon amusement, the society could not have been kept more mysteriously secret.

In an eloquent speech Patricia had laid the situation before these girls, explaining the difficulties by which she was surrounded.

At the watchword "Wolf," the "Water-Rats" sought their holes, for "Wolf" meant Fraülein, and Fraülein might mean the possible ruin of their most cherished plans.

Patricia's prolonged punishment for Monday's misdeeds still dragged through the week. Her preparation had been doubled, and in order to join her "Water-Rats," she got up at six o'clock and learnt the extra task before the hour for practising. Consequently she was often sleepy and idle in lesson time, increasing Fraülein's displeasure towards her.

"I don't know vat 'as come over you, Patricia," Fraülein said, tapping her book. "You think of somethings else—you are always *distracte*. Now, for example, of vat vere you thinking just now ven I ask you the French for "garden party" and you did not 'ear me?"

Patricia looked up from herslate and answered truthfully—

"I was thinking about some water-rats."

"Vater-rats! *Dummheit!* We 'ave nothing of vater-rats in our studies. You 'ave to memory committed '*le rat de ville*,' but dat means town rat."

"Oh! yes," said Patricia, "town rat, of course—how stupid I am!"

"Ah! that is true—*très bête*. You 'ave not de clever brains; you go wool-gathering. You never set de Thames alight!"

Patricia had scant chance of growing conceited under Fraülein's rule. In the eyes of her instructress she was everything bad. Once or twice she had tried to remove this unpleasant impression by various little kindnesses and humble advances, but they were never appreciated. Occasionally she arranged flowers in Fraülein's room, but soon discovered they were instantly cast aside.

"Flowers is un'ealthy in your room of bed," she told Patricia; "you vant to make Fraülein sick or faint dat you escape your lessons!"

The injustice of this accusation so stung Patricia she had not the heart to defend herself, or reply that it was false. To a nature less buoyant than Patricia's, contact with Fraülein would have been singularly injurious. But our heroine possessed unlimited powers of recuperation. However darkly the storm-clouds gathered, she was ready to expand again under the smallest ray of sun. Smiles would return sometimes before the tears of disappointment or annoyance were dry upon her cheeks, so that with this Heaven-blessed temperament, she braved the rough weather, without letting it crush or batter her.

The night before the regatta she could hardly sleep for thinking of the morrow. She had entered for a double-scutting, punting, and obstacle race. The latter she had thought out herself. The competitors were to start from an island in dingheys, row back to the landing-stage, tie up their boats, fly into the club room, run three times round the tea-table, eat a bun, then down the steps again into canoes, to be paddled back to the island, hauled ashore,

stripped of cushions and fittings, finally returning in comfortless undress to Thames Bank.

Now this race was characteristic of Patricia, by its utter thoughtlessness. Its disadvantages were patent on the surface. Either the girls would choke in their hurry when eating the buns, or incur an attack of indigestion, to prevent their racing again, or lose their cushions on the island, where numerous picnickers sported themselves on Saturday afternoon.

The morning proved fine, and Patricia rose early, learnt her preparation incompletely, and raced down to the club-house, where she found Hetty, Betty, and Tom shivering in bathing dresses, awaiting their first swimming lesson.

"Scratch-up" was in attendance, but Patricia would have none of his help. She ranged the children in a row, and taught them the swimming exercise with their arms. On land they were very brave, and promised to be apt pupils, but when Patricia suggested Tom taking a header from the punt, his knees began to knock together, while his teeth chattered suspiciously.

"It's a bit cold," he said, "a bit too deep I guess," looking down ruthfully at his smart

new bathing-suit. "Ain't it a pity to wet these clothes?"

"You should say 'isn't,'" Patricia corrected, "not 'ain't!' Besides, your things were made to get wet in, Tom; don't turn coward now!"

The word "coward" had a great effect on the boy, he braced himself up to the effort, and tumbled from the punt, like a frightened puppy first taking to the water. He came up spluttering, and calling out about the cold, but in a few moments he was gloating over the delights of bathing, and absolutely refusing to come ashore.

"If you don't," said Patricia, "I'll let you sink."

He clung to the side of the punt and looked up saucily—

"It's jolly nice here," he said; "won't you chuck Hetty and Betty in now?"

"No, I can't manage you all at once, and if you're not obedient — no more swimming lessons. You have been in quite long enough for a first bathe."

"'Elp! 'elp!"

The cry came from the bank, in Fraülein's shrill soprano.

"What *is* she crying 'help' for?" said Patricia.

"Oh ! Mon Dieu !—'e drown !—'e 'as fallen in de vater, and Patricia stand by and laugh. She is vickeder dan I thought !"

Fraülein ran towards the punt, and in spite of her habitual clumsiness entered it like a whirlwind, seized the wet boy in her arms, and pulled him violently out of the water, knocking his knees against the side of the boat. Tom set up a howl, and Patricia, seeing how wet he had made Fraülein, began to dry the latter's skirt with her pocket-handkerchief, and explain that Tom had not been drowning after all.

This intelligence instead of relieving Fraülein's outraged feelings, seemed to infuriate her.

"Den it is your doing, bad girl? You bring these children out to catch a death of colds—to make sport for yourself !"

"I am teaching them to swim."

"Rubbish ! Vat for dey swim—to give excitement to you? It is but your mischief again ! Go 'ome, children—run quick back—and, Patricia, come to breakfast. I am most angry vit you, most angry ! You 'ave spoilt my dress vit your foolishness."

Patricia sent her trio to the stables, Tom frowning at Fraülein for spoiling his bathe, while Hetty and Betty, much relieved at

escaping the ordeal, skipped across the lawn, rejoicing in their freedom of limb, chasing each other like kittens, the morning sun playing on their red-gold hair.

The day had started badly for Patricia, but as yet she knew nothing of Fraülein's intention. It was not till after lunch the awful news broke like a thunderbolt over her head.

"You 'ave no 'alf-'oliday," said Fraülein Parbs, "because of your impudence last Monday, and this morning's indiscretion do not make me less determined to make your punishment complete. Lessons will begin as usual, and in future you learn to treat me vit respect and deference."

"*What !*" cried Patricia. "*No half-holiday !!!*"

"You seem surprised to 'ear dat ?"

Surprised was hardly the word. Patricia was flabbergasted, amazed, horrified ! She knew that she must be at the regatta, at any cost. How could the president, the founder of the club, desert on the first occasion ? What would the girls think of her ? They could not manage alone, many things needed arranging still. The prizes had to be taken to b-house, at present they were concealed cia's wardrobe. She forgot her own

pleasure in thinking of others. For the moment she would almost have preferred to resign herself and obey, than fight with Fraülein. These perpetual battles were growing monotonous. Patricia began by arguing.

"I've been punished enough, surely," she said. "Every day—count them up, Fraülein: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday—four long days—won't that satisfy you? Isn't it rather greedy to want more—more punishment? Does it amuse you to make my life a misery, to worry, plague, tease and annoy? Oh! I'm tired of it all; I wonder you are not tired too. Can't we be better friends, and enjoy ourselves a little? Must it be all brimstone?"

Her lips trembled, her eyes grew moist. She clasped her hands pathetically. Fraülein's ire was increased only by these hurried words, this feverish supplication. What she desired in her pupil was meekness and submission of will. To be defied or argued with enraged her beyond measure.

"Chut! I listen not to your fine talk. You try to be theatrical, to act Lady Macbeth! You think to get round me dat way. I vill not 'ear or change. Ven I say a thing I mean it—I do not go back on my vord!"

"You don't know what you are doing," said Patricia, speaking very plainly and distinctly, that Fraülein might fully understand her every sentence. "I have made a most important engagement this afternoon—the happiness of many people depends upon my keeping it. This, Fraülein; is a matter of duty—I owe it to my friends. I cannot—cannot fail them! If you refuse to let me go I shall be obliged to take the matter into my own hands, and desert without leave. I don't wish to do anything wrong, so perhaps, if you think it over calmly, you will change your mind."

"Me change my mind? A very nice suggestion! A likely case! Are you not 'andful enough already without me giving up the authority of my position 'ere? No—no—no, Mademoiselle Patricia—I tell you *non*, vonce and for all! I am not idiote—I do not believe in dat 'important engagement.' It is easy to 'ave an important engagement! Come now vit me to the schoolroom, I do not let you out of my sight."

Patricia felt the moment had come to strike. Great indignation flooded her heart and brain. She was no longer a weak schoolgirl, prey to be trodden on, a puppet in the hands of Fraülein; but founder of a band—the head

of the Water-Rats—oh, proud distinction!—Water-Rats who were already gathering on the bank yonder, awaiting their leader.

“Vere are you going?” cried Fraülein. “I told you to come vis me.”

“I am going to my room to get my hat,” replied Patricia. “If you like to follow me and ask my friends you will see I have told you the truth.”

“Den you again defy me openly? Ve vill see vich is de stronger—you, or me?”

Fraülein followed Patricia, glaring alarmingly, and stood in the doorway, while the girl put on her hat.

There was silence, an awful silence, broken suddenly by the slamming of the door, the click of a turning key, and a cackle of triumph from Fraülein Parbs.

Patricia rushed across the room.

“Locked in! Trapped!” she cried.

“*Ja! Ja!*” said Fraülein. “You go no more out dis day, nor no one come near you. You ’ave no tea, and no suppare, nor speak to no ones till you come in better mind!”

CHAPTER X

HOW PATRICIA ESCAPED

POOR rat! She was indeed trapped this time, and as the sound of Fraülein's retreating footsteps died away down the passage Patricia's heart sank lower, while rage and despair tingled in every nerve. She paced the room in a feverish frenzy, she beat upon the door, calling loudly; she turned the handle and pushed with all her might, but without success.

"A prisoner!" she gasped—"a prisoner in my own house! Oh! what shall I do?"

Tears of vexation welled into her eyes, she dashed them aside angrily.

"Crying won't do any good, I must think of something better than that," said Patricia. "I can't stay boxed in here all the afternoon—it's tyranny, unlawful detention; I believe Fraülein could be summoned for it. She has taken this mean advantage because there is no one here

to protest against it or speak for me. She's a spiteful cat—I hate her! I hate her!"

For the moment Patricia's temper got the better of her. She stamped her foot, and her breath came quickly, painfully, in uneven gasps.

At last she regained her control and plunged her heated face and hands into a basin of cold water.

"Ah! That's better, that's cooled me down. I wonder if they've begun the races yet, and what they can be thinking of me for not turning up? If only there was a clock in the room, it is too awful, not even knowing the time."

She remembered having found a rat once in one of "Scratch-up's" traps by the boat-house. How anxiously the poor little thing had raced from corner to corner seeking a way of escape, forcing its nose through the iron bars and holding up its little feet as if supplicating for mercy!

"Scratch-up" was very angry because Patricia had opened the door and let the prisoner out, but now she was glad, so glad to have rescued her namesake.

Presently the sound of running feet in the passage without attracted her attention; they were not the feet of a human being, for they

came too quickly and softly, and were followed by a deep sniff under the door.

"Bully!" cried Patricia. "My poor Bully dog, do you want to come in?"

A whine signified "Yes."

"But I can't open the door, Bully; Fraülein's locked it. Oh! how I wish you could take a message for me to the club."

The dog continued whining and pressing his body against the door. His impatience increased Patricia's, the sound of his cries deepened her depression. By way of a melancholy diversion she took the regatta prizes out of the wardrobe and spread them on her bed.

"I wonder," she said, a sudden thought striking her, "if I could signal to the girls out of my window? Perhaps if I waved a red petticoat they might know I was in trouble."

She leant out with her elbows on the sill, and took a good look round. After all, the garden was not so very far below; perhaps it might be possible to escape even now in time to take the prizes and explain the cause of her delay.

A spirit of adventure, an absolutely reckless feeling came over Patricia. What did it matter if she broke her neck in the endeavour? At least she would have died for the cause—

perished in her desire to spare the Water-Rats their bitter disappointment.

Close to the sill was a water-pipe, by which she decided to descend. The house was covered in ivy, the strength of which Patricia tested by kneeling on the window ledge and tugging, at its stalwart boughs. Now and again they broke away, but Patricia was fearless and fool-hardy, and determined to try her luck.

A pleasurable excitement replaced her bitter anger, the possibility of freedom gave her fresh hope, strong nerve, and a burning desire to succeed. She remembered her father's letter wishing the Water-Rats success, and was sure in her own mind that he would instantly have restored her to liberty, could he have arrived opportunely that afternoon.

But before escaping she must lower the prizes to the ground. How to do this puzzled Patricia. For a while she stood silently thinking, her active brain turning from one plan to another rapidly.

Finally she seemed satisfied with the result of her meditation and set to work.

She wrapped the pretty gifts carefully in her bath towel, tied the ends of this wrapper in a knot, attaching thereto her three smart sashes, a blue, a pink, and a white, because there was

no string in the room, and her neckties were of insufficient length.

Carefully, cautiously, she lowered the precious bundle to the garden path beneath her window. It was a movement of extreme anxiety. Would the sashes give way, and the valuables fall helter-skelter into the bushes? No, Fate favoured her ingenious scheme, and Patricia breathed again.

"If I get down as well as the prizes I shall think myself lucky," she said.

There was not a moment to be lost, and "thinking it over" in no way helped the situation. So, with one little short prayer for safety, and a last look at the pipe, Patricia proceeded to slide down. It was not an easy proceeding, but Patricia was like a boy in the art of climbing.

To a novice this descent would have been both terrifying and impossible. Could *Fraülein* have seen her pupil I really think that lady would have screamed herself into a fit at the sight.

When Patricia felt her feet again she certainly heaved a sigh of relief, for her hands were grazed and hurt, her frock badly torn through contact with a nail. Half way down she had met a rose tree climbing round the

drawing-room window. This obstacle left sundry thorns in her bleeding fingers. She did not wait to remove these painful intruders, but picking up her bundle, and shouldering it like the pictures of Dick Whittington, ran as a hunted hare through the shrubbery towards the club-house.

A shout of delight greeted her coming. The Water-Rats, guessing that some extra task imposed by the Wolf had delayed their president, proceeded with the afternoon's racing, though the conspicuous absence of prizes somewhat damped their ardour and lessened their energies.

Things had fallen flat without Patricia, and they felt like intruders taking possession of Mr. Iven's lawn. In fact, it was an immense relief to everybody when Patricia was first sighted from the club-house window.

"Where have you been?"

"What happened?"

"Good gracious, your hands are bleeding!"

"Oh! and your dress. See how it's torn!"

"You've been crying too. Was there a row?"

Such a volume of questions all at once flooded Patricia's brain till it whirled!

"If you won't all talk together," she panted,

depositing her bundle on the steps, "I'll explain!"

"Yes, let Patricia tell us all about it. This is an interval for refreshment. We need not begin the next race for half an hour," said Violet. "Mother sent a hamper of things with plenty of lemonade and ginger-beer," she continued, drawing Patricia into the boat-house, "in case there was any bother about tea."

"How kind of her and how lucky!" cried Patricia, much consoled at the sight of so many good things. "I dare not go to the house for so much as a crust of bread, because I am supposed to have no tea or supper! I brought the cakes and buns down this morning. They are in this locker under the seat. Come and help me get them out."

"But you have not told us your story yet. We are simply dying to hear."

As Patricia added her contributions to the refreshment table she recounted her wrongs graphically, and if the Water-Rats had not been a set of civilised English girls they would have gone straight to the house and lynched Fraülein Parbs, so great was their indignation against her.

"I wish we had come in a body and made

her give you up!" said Rhoda. "If we had thought you were really a prisoner—locked in a room, caught in that mean way when your back was turned—we would have besieged Thames Bank and got you out somehow. Don't you feel rather awful about going back?"

"Of course I do," replied Patricia, squeezing the thorns out of her fingers at great personal suffering, "but isn't it worth anything to have joined you at last and brought the prizes?"

"Prizes! How delightful! We began to think they were not going to appear in to-day's programme. You must give them away, Patricia, and I do hope you will have to give one to yourself. The obstacle race is over unfortunately, and we modified it a little because you were not here to explain it all over again. We left out the eating of the buns. You see we had just had lunch, and we thought we might run short at tea."

"That was feeble of you," said Patricia.

"Oh! and it was *so* embarrassing," cried Rhoda, "when we landed on the island and pulled the cushions out of the canoes! Some dreadful cockneys who were picnicing called, 'A race! a race!' and crowded round us. They cheered as we paddled back, and said,

'Go it, little 'un—two to one on the blue cap!' which remark I knew was meant for me. Then, of course, afterwards we went to fetch our carpets and cushions. Would you believe it, they had hidden them all in the long grass behind the trees! It gave me such a turn, because I was in your canoe and I thought for the moment they were stolen."

"Poor Rhoda! How you must have amused the cockneys," said Patricia, laughing. "It wasn't at all nice of them, though."

So they chatted till the time came to race again, and Patricia, eager for the fray, sprang into her punt, pole in hand, rolling up her sleeves for the punting race.

"I meant to practice," she said, "but I've had such a busy week. Fraülein's kept me in every day. I don't suppose I've a chance against you house-boat girls!"

"Don't make too sure. You are good at everything, Patricia."

They spoke truly, for as Patricia punted up to the starting-point she sent her craft shooting through the water with the straight, swift movement of an experienced puntist. She forgot her torn frock and sore hands when the words, "Are you ready—go!" fell on her listening ear.

Off she went, the muscles rising and swelling on her bare arms, her lips parted in a smile, her body bending gracefully with the light bamboo pole.

She felt at once that the race was hers, for the others splashed their poles into the water without dropping them noiselessly through finger and thumb, doing double the work with half the effect of Patricia's method.

The course being fairly long Patricia had time to reflect. She thought of several things. Her ideas ran something like this—

"I've started the club—it's practically my show! Father has given the prizes, therefore I ought not to win my own prize."

She was letting the others catch her up; it amused her to do so. Now they were neck to neck, thus Patricia kept the race at the utmost pitch of excitement.

Just as they neared the winning-post she relaxed her speed without appearing to do so intentionally, and the victorious punt shot past her with a shout of triumph and delight.

How Patricia laughed in her sleeve!

"Beaten but not disgraced," said her friends. "It was the best race of the day, and you only just lost the best prize."

"Never mind—better luck next time, Patricia."

Your form was splendid. You punted with such an air. The others were thrown quite in the shade, though they did go a little faster just at the end!"

Patricia listened to the compliments and condolences of her adoring Water-Rats, as they crowded round her on the landing-stage, and felt supremely happy and contented. The talk, the movement, the fun, put Fraülein and the wrath to come right into the background of Patricia's thoughts.

Even to the least conceited, popularity is pleasing.

The snubs of her governess were temporarily forgotten, swamped by the goodwill of her friends.

CHAPTER XI

WHAT THE NIGHT BROUGHT

THE evening shadows were falling, the prizes had been distributed, and the happy Water-Rats began to dwindle away, saying goodbye regretfully to Patricia.

"Good luck, and don't be eaten by the Wolf!"

"Bear up, old girl, and don't let yourself be crushed."

This was the sort of advice that came from each as they took a fond farewell of their president.

Patricia watched them go one after the other with failing courage. It was all very well to say "don't let yourself be crushed!" All very well for these girls, with happy homes and parents on the premises. But to the lonely, motherless child, with the desire ever upper-

most "that father shouldn't be worried," it was a different outlook.

She felt something very like a lump rise in her throat as the boats pushed off—leaving Patricia standing on the landing-stage, trying to smile, and waving as if to contradict by her attitude the misgiving that afflicted her soul.

Violet and Rhoda were the last to say good-bye. They saw, as friends, what the others as acquaintances failed to detect. Nothing was lost on their vigilant eyes—Patricia's quivering lips, her sudden depression when the gaiety ended, and the tremor in her voice as she replied: "I'm all right, don't mind about me!"

"She is simply miserable!" Rhoda whispered to Violet.

"Yes! I can't bear to leave her like this, it seems too cruel, especially after we have all enjoyed ourselves so much."

The sisters hesitated, holding a little colloquy on the boat-house steps.

"Patricia, what do you say to coming back with us to-night? It is simply running into the lion's jaws to return to Fraülein! She is making your life unbearable, and we will tell mother all about it. I'm sure she will be sympathetic. Mother is awfully fond of you! I heard her telling a friend the other day that Patricia Iven

was 'such a delightful girl, so original and amusing.'"

Patricia knit her brows. She had never thought of herself as being either original or amusing, but she knew she felt very sad and frightened of going back to Fraülein.

The idea of running away and seeking refuge with Rhoda and Violet at Lewis Park, appealed to her forcibly. What a splendid climax to the escape from the window, to fly as a fugitive to this proffered haven of rest and safety!

The quick, uneven beating of her heart began to still down to the peaceful, regular tapping of which we are unconscious.

She breathed again freely, the colour came back to her cheeks, and in a fit of gratitude she hugged her deliverers enthusiastically.

"How sweet of you to think of such a nice plan! I feel as if a load of iron had been lifted off my shoulders. But are you sure your people won't mind having me?"

"Of course not, and you needn't bother about luggage! Rhoda and I can lend you everything you want. I only hope it will teach the old Wolf a lesson, for she needs one badly. We had better be off, or she may discover your absence and come on your track. Jump into the boat, and I'll row. The carriage is coming

to fetch us at the boat-house. It's rather exciting smuggling you away, I do hope we sha'n't get caught."

Violet took the sculls, and the boat shot quickly through the water. The river looked its loveliest, with the shadows creeping over the red tide, dyed crimson by a beautiful sunset. Patricia was always keenly sensible to the beauties of nature, she never passed them by as matters of course. She grew silent as she watched the changing colours of sky and stream, dabbling her fingers in the cool ripples, and sighing deeply in contentment.

The boat-house was reached all too soon, and the three girls sprang out, losing no time as they ran to the carriage.

"Come along, Patricia," said Violet. "We have no time to dawdle. Drive quickly, Mellist, we are rather late, and," she added in an undertone, "wolves come out at night!"

Patricia's spirits rose with every turn of the carriage wheels.

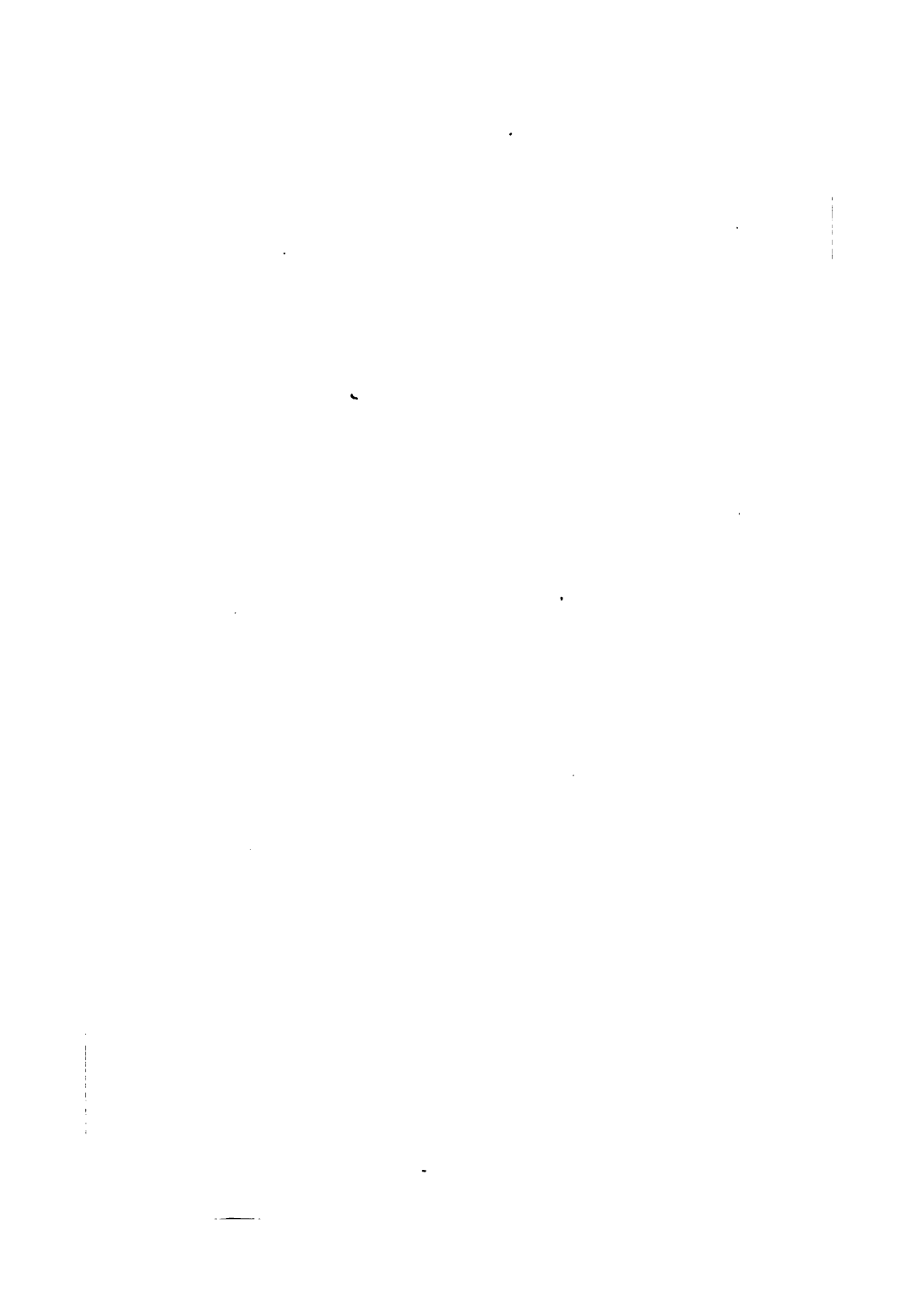
"I am not shirking any work, because tomorrow is Sunday," she said, "and it's such a relief our first regatta has been successful."

Rhoda and Violet, highly elated at having rescued Patricia from her fate, took her in triumph to their mother on arriving home.



Violet took the sculls, and the boat shot quickly through the water.

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They explained the situation in full, detailing Patricia's punishment, her captivity, the descent down the drainpipe, which accounted for her torn frock and scratched hands.

"Poor little girl! What a time you have had! We must bind up your hands, lend you a dress, and see what can be done about *Fraülein* and these prolonged punishments. She is certainly a very hard taskmistress. Violet run and fetch some vaseline, poor Patricia's wounds will be the better for a little care. I suppose you sent back word to Jane or somebody, to say where you had gone?"

"No," replied Patricia, "but I don't think I shall be missed, for *Fraülein* said I was to have no tea or supper, and no one was to come near me."

"But, my dear, you cannot possibly stay out all night without your absence being discovered, and think what a commotion it will cause! We had enough of that the other evening, when you three little madcaps took your mysterious train journey. I'll send a messenger to Thames Bank to say you are staying here, or they will be telegraphing to Mr. Iven."

"I never thought of that," said Patricia. "I should not like father to be frightened again, he might think I had been drowned at the regatta."

"Make your mind easy, I will put everything right. Now, Violet and Rhoda had better take you upstairs to get tidy for supper; you all look very hot after your exertions."

In the meanwhile Patricia's room had been left unmolested at Thames Bank. Fraülein spent the afternoon in a fit of sulking, and devoured an enormous tea, without a compassionate thought for her supposed prisoner upstairs. But towards evening Jane, who had received strict orders not to go near Patricia's room, began to feel uneasy.

"It ain't fair," she said to Cook; "that old woman upstairs isn't doing right in locking our Miss Patricia up all these hours! If I knew where the key was, I'd 'ave 'er out in a jiffy—I would. I'm not sure it isn't a case for the police. It makes my blood boil to think of that furreigner treating Miss Patricia as if she was a criminal."

"Poor young lady!" murmured Cook, shaking her head dolefully, "this is what comes of gentlemen a-leaving their offspring to the care of strangers! My 'eart bleeds to think of that motherless darling going without her tea and cake, and she with such a hearty appetite too."

"It was all I could do," retorted Jane, "to

keep a civil tongue in my head when Fraülein rang for a fresh pot of jam. "The jam's run out," I said, knowing we'd a store of jars in the back pantry. But there! if I did tell a lie, I felt a deal better for it, and I hope the Almighty will forgive me for giving way to the temptation!"

"I've burnt her pudding for this evening," said Cook, "and I hope she'll enjoy her meals alone! She won't find there is much in this house worth eating, when Miss Patricia isn't at table."

"And what a greedy old woman she is!" added Jane knowingly. "You should see 'er turn up 'er nose if everything isn't tip-top. Hoity toity! she'll send it back just as if she paid the bills out of her own pocket. I mean to 'ave a word with the master when he comes home. Mr. Iven is the last gentleman to see 'is daughter bullied."

"Suppose," said Cook—"suppose, Jane, you cut upstairs on the quiet, tap at the door, and consult with Miss Patricia. She might be able to lower a basket out of the window for provisions, or give you a hint as to where Fraülein is likely to have hidden the key."

Jane slipped away with a knowing nod, and crept softly to the girl's room.

"Miss Patricia—Miss Patricia, dear, come to the keyhole a minute—it's Jane!"

No answer. The stillness in the room struck terror to the maid's fond heart. She tapped loudly, and raised her voice—

"Miss Patricia—can't you hear? Are you ill? Oh! Miss Patricia!"

She was knocking now with such force that only a stone-deaf or fainting inhabitant could have failed to attend.

"Good gracious, good goodness! there's some mischief done here. What *will* the master say?"

Jane turned to run towards the schoolroom, but met Fraülein on the stairs.

"You 'ave disobey my orders; Jane, you 'ave been speaking with Mademoiselle Patricia!"

Fraülein Parbs looked very severe as she spoke.

"No," replied Jane, "not speaking! Miss Patricia must be taken ill, for I can't get an answer out of her, though I've nearly knocked the door in."

"Mein Gott! you do not mean dat! You do not mean vat you say?"

"Come quickly," replied Jane, "there is not a moment to spare. If Miss Patricia has had a fit and died, you are to blame!"

Fraülein was frightened now; her guilty conscience began to prick, she felt strangely uncomfortable.

She hurried to Patricia's room, fumbling in her pocket for the key.

"Ver is it—dat key—I 'ave lost 'im—'e 'e 'as gone from my pocket? Ah! vat bad fortune!"

She seized the door handle, and shook it violently.

"Open, Patricia—quick—quick—it is Fraülein who comes to give you your suppare! Ah! but I talk the nonsense. How can you open without the key? But speak—say you are vell—not thirsty—or hungry—but good now—good now!"

Jane watched her pleading, stolidly looking on at the frantic gestures of the foreigner.

"Ah! she answer not—*wie schrecklich!* Run quick, Jane, come vit me, and we search the key together. I must 'ave left 'im in the schoolroom. Vat shall I do if any harm 'ave arrived to dis child?"

"What will Mr. Iven do?" said Jane sternly. "Miss Patricia is the apple of his eye!"

Fraülein's terror was fairly roused; in her excitement she turned the schoolroom topsy-turvy. She searched in every nook and corner,

while the ready tears flowed down her cheeks.

"Ah! I might 'ave known dat Patricia would do somethings foolish to spite me. Vas dere a knife, or anytings sharp in de room vit vich she could kill 'erself?"

"Oh, yes," said Jane, "a large pair of scissors which she borrowed from me yesterday, and several penknives."

"She 'as injured 'er body to spite me. Oh, vat a dreadful girl! She may now be at de point to die, and dis key comes not. Send at full speed to fetch a man for to scratch the lock—to pick it! Meanwhile I continue my chase—my 'unt for dis key!"

Jane ran quickly, and soon the whole house was in a state of commotion. The men came in, and the women ran upstairs, but before the door had time to receive any injuries "Scratch-up," who was devoted to Patricia, brought his long ladder and mounted to the window.

"The room's empty!" he shouted; "there ain't a blessed creature in it, and that's true!"

"Empty!" The word came in chorus from the anxious listeners.

"Yes, and what's more, the ivy round the window's all torn away—and, bless me, if the rose bush ain't broken underneath! It's as

clear as daylight, the young missus 'as 'ooked it. Small blame to 'er, say I, if persons what ain't no right locks 'er up, 'er as fine-spirited a lady as ever was!"

"Vat is dat impertinent man saying?" asked Fraülein. "Did I understand 'im to call me a 'person'? Ah! Patricia is a demon indeed; I go to search her in town and country—I come no more back till she is found. Listen, dat bell downstairs 'as been ringing dis long time. Perhaps it is Mademoiselle returned vonce more. I wait to 'ear."

The servants descended, and soon brought a letter addressed to Fraülein. She read it with set lips and an agitated face.

"Mademoiselle Patricia is staying for to-night at Lewis Park, mit 'er friends," Fraülein informed Jane. "She do dat to put me in bad light vit Mr. Iven, to make believe I no treat 'er vell!"

Jane sniffed, and refrained from uttering a very personal response.

"Thank goodness, that old dragon will be shown up at last!" she said to Cook; "quite time, too! Things have come to a pretty pass when a young lady can't stay in her own home!"

Fraülein went to her room in a very bad

temper. As she undressed the missing key fell out of her petticoat.

"Ah!" she said, picking it up and holding it aloft, "you 'ave much to answer for; you caused me to lock Patricia in, you create great troubles! I 'ave no patience vit you—or dat girl!"

So Fraülein laid the key amongst her trinkets, and went to bed mumbling discontentedly.

CHAPTER XII

FRAÜLEINS CONGÉ

ON Sunday Mr. Iven joined Patricia at Lewis Park, and heard the story from his hostess, who strongly advised him to dispense with the services of Fraülein Parbs as speedily as possible.

"I had no idea she was such an old dragon," he said, "and I'm only too grateful to you for taking pity on my little girl and letting her stay here. If she had told me what kind of a woman this German was, I should have made other arrangements sooner. I have always been a great advocate for freedom. I have always given Patricia her head, and I can't see she's any the worse for it, can you?"

"Certainly not. I think Patricia can stand spoiling, she is so absolutely unselfish."

"Well, I won't have her worried by Fraülein Parbs any more, and it's very good of you to

give her an open invitation to stay here till I find a new governess. I've had enough of trusting my sister with that mission; she just takes the first that comes, without an ounce of discrimination. I rather pride myself on being a judge of character. I will try my hand, and look out for a more suitable companion to cheer poor Patricia's loneliness. I often wonder if I am doing wrong in keeping her at home. It is a good deal selfishness on my part: I like to find her there when I come down from town. It is nice to feel there is always a smile and a bright face to welcome me at Thames Bank. Patricia is growing more like her mother every day."

"Yes, I have noticed the likeness lately, one sees it as she gets older. Still, I must say, I don't think it is a good thing for a girl to work alone, with no competition—or young companion. She is far more likely to become apathetic—perhaps lazy even."

"But you could not call Patricia apathetic. Of all the harum-scarum creatures——"

"Oh! yes, yes; I meant as far as lessons are concerned. But I'm not one to preach, for Violet and Rhoda have about as easy a time of it as anybody could have! I think if you got a much younger governess for

Patricia they would have more in common, and probably 'hit it off' far better."

"I will advertise, and interview the ladies at my rooms in town. Patricia will then have a chance of judging my taste. Ah, here she comes, and how happy she looks with your girls."

Rhoda, Violet, and their guest came running across the lawn to where Mr. Iven was sitting under the trees.

"The dogcart is at the door waiting for you, Mr. Iven," said Violet. "Where are you going?"

"To Thames Bank. Is Patricia ready?"

"What! You are not going to take her back?"

The three faces fell simultaneously to such an alarming length that Mr. Iven burst out laughing.

"No, no, it was too bad of me to tease you. Patricia shall remain in her haven of safety, I am only going for a friendly little chat with her dear Fraülein Parbs. I shall tell that good lady the Thames Valley is very relaxing, does not suit her health, and advise her to try a more bracing climate."

"Oh, joy! Patricia is not to go back to her Wolf. I'm so glad! Isn't that splendid news?"

The two sisters clapped their hands as if they were the gainers by this piece of good fortune. Patricia went quietly up to her father, slipped her cool little hand into his palm, and gave it a squeeze.

"You *are* a dear!" she whispered. "But don't be angry with Fraülein."

"I think Fraülein can take care of herself, you need not worry!"

"We ought to go and get ready," said Violet.

"Where are you off to this afternoon?" asked Mr. Iven.

"We have promised to attend a flower service. It is such a pretty sight, I wish you could come. We are all going to carry up pots and bunches of flowers. They are sent afterwards to the hospitals. We shall stay and help pack them up when the service is over, so we've a busy afternoon before us."

Mr. Iven drove away with his mind full of Patricia and the future. He did so want her to be happy.

He drove straight into the stables, and entered the house by the garden door. He missed the running feet that usually greeted his arrival; the place did not seem the same without Patricia.

The first person he met was the faithful Jane.

"Oh, sir," she cried, "how is Miss Patricia?"

'Very well, thank you, Jane, none the worse for her escapades; though now I come to look at the height of the window I am surprised she got out of it unhurt."

"Bless her dear heart," said Jane enthusiastically, "I don't believe as nothing would keep her in once she made up her mind to be off and away. But there, it did give us a turn when we first missed her, and if you'll excuse me saying it, sir, things ain't quite as you'd like to see 'em when you're not here, sir. Fraülein Parbs will starve Miss Patricia under our very noses one of these days, for she did her best to do it on Saturday. It can't be your wishes, sir, that Miss Patricia should go without tea or supper, and be locked in a room for all them hours."

"No, Jane, no. It will be different in the future, and thank you for speaking. Where is Fraülein?"

"In the schoolroom, sir. She has been in a rare fuss about Miss Patricia. There is no telling what she won't do when the poor young lady returns."

Mr. Iven strode upstairs, he tapped at the

door imperatively, and opened it before Fraülein could reply. She was lying on the sofa with her fringe in curl-pins, reading a French novel, which she secreted in the voluminous folds of her skirt as Mr. Iven entered.

The schoolroom looked cheerful and pleasant, with the sun peeping through the green blinds lowered for shade.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I am disturbing you?"

"Not at all, Monsieur," replied Fraülein, showing signs of agitation, "not at all. I rejoice to see you."

She put her hand to her fringe and felt the pins.

"I have come from Lewis Park where Patricia is staying," said Mr. Iven. "I think it is advisable she should remain there for a day or two. She is very happy with her friends, and it is my chief wish to see her bright and contented. I hear that you and Patricia have not been good friends lately."

"Ah, you mistake, Monsieur, ve vere *schr freundlich* till she vas naughty and unmanageable. I try to command 'er spirit, to make her nice girl, good mannered, submissive, ladylike, and all dat."

"The effort has evidently proved unsuccessful," retorted Mr. Iven, smiling slightly, "for Patricia appears to have been more tomboyish than usual, judging from the broken rose tree under her window. Anyhow, as your relations have become so strained, it is wiser you should not meet again. I think, therefore, that as soon as convenient——"

Fraülein broke into his sentence with quick indignation. "You send me away—me who 'ave received de best German and French education, and been in good families dese twenty years? Ah, *nein*, Monsieur, you will not be so 'asty; we overlook dis conversation."

"I am sorry to say there are facts which cannot be overlooked. I strongly disapprove of your treatment of Patricia. I could not trust her again in your hands with any confidence. Please, therefore, consider the matter settled, and our conversation final."

"Ah, she talk against me, dat bad girl! She poison your mind mit untrue sayings."

"I cannot admit Patricia is untruthful. Tell me, now, is it a false statement that you locked her in her room for the whole afternoon, gave her no tea, threatened to send her to bed supperless, and forbade the servants to go near her?"

"She deserve dat and more for the big disobedience, the large rudeness. I say, 'Stay and do your lessons.' She say, 'No, I go out; I 'ave important engagement.' You are too lenient, Monsieur, you spoil your daughter vit too great kindness. It do 'er much 'arm in years to come—it make her bad wife, bad mother. I vas 'er real friend, for it pain me to give 'er punishment, it grieve me sore."

"In the future you will be spared the pain," said Mr. Iven. "You will doubtless find some more suitable and peaceful situation, with quiet, 'ladylike' pupils, who will do you unlimited credit."

Fraülein saw it was useless to argue with this calm, cynical man. So they spoke of terms and parted, Fraülein feeling the sting of defeat and inwardly railing against Patricia.

"It is great pity," she muttered, when he left her again in undisputed possession of the comfortable schoolroom. "I vas vell placed 'ere, vell fed, and independent. No tiresome rules, no orders, good service, pleasant garden, lots of leisure. But Patricia 'as the bad 'eart, she turn me out friendless and 'omeless; she like dat! It is strange I 'ave no friends, I lose dem always; dey forget poor Fraülein!"

So she unwound her grey locks from the hard steel pins, looking forlornly at their limp curl.

"It is too 'ot for de 'air to frizz, it is unbecoming veather ; even de 'andsomest voman could not look pretty to-day."

Patricia, who had returned from the flower service, was waiting for Mr. Iven at the lodge gates, swinging herself backwards and forwards for the sake of diversion.

She opened them widely for him to drive through, touching her hat and bowing low, in imitation of the old lodge-keeper.

Then she ran after the cart, and sprang into the seat beside her father.

"How did Fraülein take it?" she asked.

"I expect she is very glad to be going away."

"Well, I don't know about that! She thinks you are a pretty tiresome piece of goods."

"Yes. Fraülein can't bear me, we never could get on."

"You must try and make your next governess like you better. How do you think you'll manage it, eh?"

"I don't know," said Patricia, "it's awfully hard to *make* any one like you. It seems a sort of thing that comes naturally, or doesn't come—one of the two."

"We shall see," replied Mr. Iven, with a reassuring smile. "Anyhow, I am not going to bother your aunt about it; she would be shocked to hear Fraülein had stayed so short a time. We don't want you to get a bad character in the family, old lady."

"I don't think any one ever had such a kind father," said Patricia, as they drew up.

Mr. Iven went into the library and wrote out an advertisement.

"There," he murmured, folding it into an envelope, "I wonder how many answers that will bring from old and young. Anyway, it's the first step in search of 'the ideal governess.' I wonder if I shall find her, if she will come my way."

"I think," Patricia said to Violet, "I think I will write Fraülein a little letter, just to say goodbye, and show I don't bear malice. I expect I was very irritating, and Fraülein can't help being bad-tempered if she's made so; only it is rather difficult to think what to put."

Patricia drew a sheet of notepaper forward, and bit the end of her pen. Presently she wrote :—"MY DEAR FRAÜLEIN,—I hear you are going away. I hope you are not very angry with me, for I really am very sorry if I caused you annoyance. Please tell cook from

me to cut you a packet of my favourite sandwiches to take on your journey—she will know the sort I mean. If ever you want a friend you can rely on your tiresome pupil.—PATRICIA IVEN.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE IDEAL GOVERNESS

“**Y**ES, I really think you will like her,” said Mr. Iven.

“Describe her to me,” cried Patricia, perching herself on the arm of his chair. “Is she dark—or fair—tall—short—elderly? Oh! dear—I’m so impatient; do be quick and tell me.”

“There is a saying, Patricia, ‘Sufficient unto the day——’ Well, you know the rest.”

“But Miss Wilson isn’t going to be an evil I’m sure. It did feel so funny coming back to find Fraülein flown. I must say I prefer her room to her company. She never answered my letter, and the servants say she was very cross when she left, though she gave my message about the sandwiches, and Cook cut her a large packet. It seems such a short while ago I was waiting in alone to receive

Fraülein, and now we are waiting together, you and I, for another new governess. I don't mind a bit as you are at home, but it felt awful last time."

"Yes, I was very sorry to leave you. The episode of Fraülein Parbs was unfortunate from the commencement."

"But you have not told me yet what Miss Wilson is like."

"Well, considering the carriage is already on its way from the station with Miss Wilson inside, I think you must contain your soul in patience until she comes."

"You are a tease, you won't satisfy my curiosity! No, I sha'n't light your cigar now, you don't deserve it."

In contradiction to her words she ran to refill her father's empty matchbox.

Patricia's eyes were particularly bright this afternoon, she was excited at the thought of the new comer.

"There's the carriage with her boxes; they are much nicer boxes than Fraülein's, not so fussy looking. Yes, I think Miss Wilson will be nice from her luggage, if one can judge by that."

Patricia ran out to the doorstep, but her face fell, for the carriage was empty.

"Hasn't she come?" Patricia asked the coachman.

"Yes Miss, the lady will be here directly; she's riding her bicycle up, and stopped at the hill."

"Her bicycle! How lovely! Father, do you hear?—she's got a bicycle, so we shall be able to ride together. Won't that be fun?"

"Yes, I thought it would please you. Shall we go and meet her?"

Patricia followed her father joyfully.

"Rather!" she said; "now I'm quite happy about Miss Wilson."

As Patricia spoke, a slim little figure in a light bicycling dress and sailor hat came in sight. She was pedalling briskly, but sprang from her wheel on seeing Mr. Iven.

"How do you do?" she said, shaking hands with them both. "This is Patricia, I suppose. It was so kind of you to send the carriage to meet me, Mr. Iven, and it seemed dreadfully ungrateful to decline the drive, but I didn't know what to do with my bicycle!"

"I'm afraid you found it very hot riding."

"No, the air seemed delicious after a long train journey, and I quite enjoyed the spin."

"What a jolly machine!" said Patricia.



“How do you do?” she said, shaking hands.

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"Yes, it runs very lightly—try it, won't you?"

"May I?"

"Certainly!"

So Patricia sprang into the saddle, and went spinning ahead of her father and Miss Wilson, testing the bicycle before she had thought of testing or investigating the new governess.

Her impression was of a young and exceedingly agreeable little woman, with merry, grey eyes, a good-tempered mouth, and a fresh, almost babyish, complexion. Something in Miss Wilson's manner instantly invited confidence. Patricia felt that the stranger was her friend already.

She rode back, ecstatic in her praise of the machine.

"We thought you would like tea in the garden," said Patricia, "and I'll show you the schoolroom afterwards."

The tray was set on a wicker table under the trees, and they settled in a comfortable group, while Patricia poured out tea.

How different—oh! how different to *Fraülein's* arrival.

Miss Wilson was delighted with the river and the boats. She declared she loved sailing and understood it thoroughly—any outdoor amusement seemed to appeal to her strongly.

After tea Mr. Iven went to his study to write letters, and Patricia took Miss Wilson to the club boat-house, for already she had confided the whole history of the Water-Rats to the new governess.

"It must be great fun," she said. "Do get up another regatta soon, I shall be so amused to look on. You can make me judge or umpire, or something useful I've no doubt. I suppose I am too old to be elected a Water-Rat?"

"Not at all. I'll propose you at our next committee meeting," said Patricia. "I am sure they will all be ever so pleased to make you a member. It will be so much jollier than when Fraülein was here, for we dared not tell her anything."

"You had a bad time, I hear, with your foreign governess; but you know foreigners are rather excitable, and they don't quite understand our ways. I expect you are well ahead with your French and German."

"Fairly so, but Fraülein never gave a word of praise—never—never—even when I tried hard, worked well, and really deserved it. So I lost heart at last, and didn't trouble myself."

"What a pity! I hope it won't be like that with me."

"I don't think so," said Patricia. She led

the way to the stables as she spoke, and introduced Miss Wilson to the little trio—Hetty, Betty, and Tom.

“What dear, clean, pretty children,” whispered Miss Wilson to Patricia; “I don’t know when I have seen such sweet things. Their hair is so picturesque, cut square on their foreheads, and hanging round their faces like Pym’s pictures. Let us take them in the garden and make them talk.”

“They don’t need much ‘making,’” said Patricia. “Come along, children, and don’t pretend you are shy. This kind lady is going to take you in the garden, and you must be very good.”

The little troop went to the far lawn, and sat on the bank, while Patricia told the story of their acrobatic performance — when Fraülein refused to lend a hand, and what a fuss it caused.

Miss Wilson remarked that she hoped they would not repeat the experiment for her benefit, as, in spite of being an enthusiastic cyclist, her nerves were not equal to such a severe strain.

“Are you another Fraülein?” asked Tom—
“are you a governess?”

“Don’t be rude!” said Patricia, hushing him up; but Miss Wilson only laughed.

"Yes," she said, "I am a governess. Why do you ask?"

"Because," replied Tom, with a little hesitation, "you don't look a bit like the others what comed; they was none of them dressed in pretty frocks, they——"

But Patricia rolled him down the bank, and broke into the conversation.

"Tom has too much to say; he is a wonderfully observant child. He always likes pretty ladies."

Tom came creeping back, this time avoiding Patricia, and getting to the other side of Miss Wilson, where he settled himself in discreet silence, watching her with his wide, blue eyes, and now and again touching her frock gently with the end of his finger.

"He is lost in admiration!" whispered Patricia; "it is too funny!"

Hetty and Betty played running games up and down the paths, but Tom refused all invitations to join them, and sat in solemn attendance till Miss Wilson and Patricia rose to go in.

"Isn't she awfully nice?" said Patricia, bursting into her father's study with a beaming face; "and she's going to be a Water-Rat! She has promised to make some lovely prizes

for our next regatta—she paints on satin, and has done lots of handkerchief sachets and things for bazaars.”

“Then you think I have chosen wisely for you, Patricia?”

“Yes—yes, indeed—I quite love Miss Wilson already; we are going to be regular chums, I can see that!”

Mr. Iven felt vastly relieved at the success of his search; this was evidently “the ideal governess” at last.

“I’m so glad, dear,” he said, kissing Patricia. “Be happy—and be good!”

Patricia’s first agreeable impressions of Miss Wilson increased with time, instead of diminishing. In lesson hours Miss Wilson was by no means too lenient; she liked things done well, and praised or blamed accordingly, but she never nursed a grievance or bore malice afterwards. As soon as the books were put away, she was, as Patricia described it, “game for anything.” Bicycling, boating, walking, or driving, all were indulged in according to mood and weather, and taken in a pure spirit of pleasure, not necessity. She never made a duty of exercise, or ordered Patricia out, as *Fraülein* so frequently did in the dreary days of quarrelling and fault-finding.

One Saturday morning, when they were discussing holiday plans, a letter in a thin, foreign hand came for Patricia.

"It is Fraülein Parb's writing," she said; "how strange! What can she have to say to me?"

She opened the envelope curiously, reading the contents with a grave face.

"Oh, dear! Poor Fraülein. She is ill and in great distress at Minstone—that's a town about three miles from here. She says she is in a lodging and obliged to keep her bed. If I am passing any time, will I look in and see her? Why, of course I will! I must go to-day, mustn't I, Miss Wilson? We'll have the carriage and take her a lot of nice things. The first grapes are just ripe and fit for picking, and invalids like jelly, don't they? We'll certainly take some jelly and champagne—champagne picks people up when they are very weak I have been told—it sometimes saves their lives. I am sure father would wish her to have some."

Miss Wilson entered into Patricia's kind-hearted plans enthusiastically. She had heard a good deal about Fraülein from time to time, and admired Patricia's forgiving spirit.

"I'm a bit of a doctor, you know," she said.

"At one time I meant to go in for hospital nursing, but I was not strong enough for the work. We will see what we can do for Fraülein."

So they started off, having provided themselves with a hamper of luxuries to take to the ex-governess.

"I've never seen her, poor thing, since the day she locked me into my room," said Patricia. "How odd that we should be going to meet again. Fraülein used to suffer from a cough; she always sucked lozenges at lesson time, and I disliked the smell of them so. I expect she has one of the bad asthmatic attacks she told me about. All her relations are dead, and she doesn't make friends."

Minstone was a fairly large, dirty town, with nasty little side streets of closely built houses. It was down one of these the carriage turned, after being directed by a policeman.

"Can she be staying here? It looks so very poky and uncomfortable," said Patricia.

The door opened, and a slovenly dressed woman started open-mouthed at the carriage, with the two figures in light cotton dresses seated under parasols.

"Does Fraülein Parbs live here?" asked Patricia.

"Yes, Miss; she's got the top room of all. Will you come in?"

"Yes, I want to see her. Is she better?"

"Well, I can't say as I see much improvement," replied the woman; "but there, she's a difficult creature to do anything for, or get on with. It's worry, worry, worry—scold, scold, scold—all day and night, just as if I was a kid at school. Half the time I can't understand what she's a-sayin' or a-grumblin' about. My rooms is real comfortable that no one need complain."

"We can carry the hamper between us," said Miss Wilson.

They followed the landlady up innumerable flights of rickety stairs till Fraülein's stuffy little apartment was reached. They tapped gently.

"*Herein!*" came from a shrill voice.

The landlady shrugged her shoulders.

"There! you hear. '*Herrin!*' Who's to know what that means? I suppose it's some foreign language. I always go in whether I understand or not; it is the best way."

They entered as noiselessly as possible.

Fraülein raised herself and glanced critically at Patricia

"Ah! I did not think you would come. I am much surprised you so trouble yourself."

"I was sorry to hear you were ill," said Patricia, going to her side. "I am glad you wrote, for you must be very lonely here. I have brought Miss Wilson with me; we've got some things to try and tempt your appetite. May we put them on this table?"

"Ah! you prove very kind; it is more than I expect," murmured Fraülein, tears rising in her eyes. "You 'ave the kind 'eart after all. It is me that vas mistaken."

She watched Patricia set out the dainties.

"Vat lovely grapes! *Mein Gott!* the very sight do make my mouth to water. I 'ave seen nothing so good dis long time. Oh! and you bring the champagne, you dear, *Süsses kind!* 'Ow can I thank you with enough gratitude."

"Please don't thank me," said Patricia, "I would much rather you did not; and now you are coughing again. You ought to do something for that bad cough."

"I need a poultice, but dis voman here cannot make one worth the having. She spill the vater and slop 'im about till she make me sick mit her *dummheit.*"

“I’ll make you a beauty ; it is a special art of mine,” said Miss Wilson cheerfully. “Come, Patricia, lend a hand, we’ll get the things and do it now at once.”

CHAPTER XIV

CONTENTMENT

PATRICIA and Miss Wilson were like two good angels flitting about Fraülein's room. The poultice proved a great success, causing immediate relief, and their cheerful talk and pleasant company did wonders for the depressed invalid.

"Oh! it is good—good to 'ave you, dear child," murmured Fraülein; "you bring me much comfort and joy. I regret I did not know your generosity—your kind 'eart sooner. I regret dat to my dying day—I weep to think of it—and I pray you forget all de past."

"Don't trouble your head about that now, I shall not remember," said Patricia, seating herself at the foot of Fraülein's bed.

Miss Wilson had gone out to order some medicine, leaving Patricia in charge to remove the poultice if Fraülein so desired.

"What shall you do when you are well again?" asked the girl.

"Ah! I 'ave a chance to go daily to a school near 'ere, for to give German and French lessons—to take classes; it suit me better than a private 'ouse. I get out of my temper ven I am always mit young people; it do try my nerve. I feel angry, and den dey call me cross and arouse my fury; so I suffer—lose my situation, or my good health."

"Then you would keep on your room here?"

"Yes, and ven I make more money I take a better room lower down, with two vindows in it and three tables—vun on vich to write, another on vich to work, and de third for eating purpose. So I live comfortable, and no more make the grumbles. But for this moment I am all anxiety. The people at the school may not keep de place for me; they fill 'im up. I am in despair to think of dat, it keep me awake at night. If I could get up and go and see Madame I could ask her to vait. I could show her my good testimonials—they are in dat drawer over dere."

"Is 'Madame' the head mistress of the school?"

"Yes. The 'ouse is near 'ere in Brooke

Street ; it suit my convenience to perfection."

"If you like," said Patricia, "I will go and see her for you, and take the testimonials. I will tell her all about your first-rate Berlin education. I will persuade her to keep the post open for a little while, and between us I fancy Miss Wilson and I will get you on your legs again in a few days. Miss Wilson says you want thoroughly feeding up, and to take a strong tonic."

"Ah ! your bountiful kindness do overcome me."

"I shall enjoy to go. Here is Miss Wilson ; and oh, what a large bottle of medicine she has brought ! If you drink all that, Fraülein, you ought to get well ! I hope there are some sweets to take after it, for it looks nasty enough."

"I eat dese good grapes ; they make my throat quite better. But with what consolation shall I sleep to-night if you will go, dear Patricia, to Clavier House !"

Patricia explained the object of her mission to Miss Wilson, who was quite willing she should go. So, armed with a bundle of testimonials, the fearless advocate sallied forth, and entered the carriage breathlessly.

"Drive to Clavier House, Brooke Street," she said, and the coachman wondered, from her radiant face, what the excitement could be.

At last Patricia was actually to enter the sacred precincts of a girls' school. School, with its many companions, its line of desks, its classes! Numerous were the stories Patricia had read of school life, and they always interested her deeply. She knew the good girl in fiction, who is misjudged and suffers in silence for the fault of another; the sneak; the bully; the cheat who cribs and copies—they were all familiar types to Patricia.

Perhaps she might catch sight of them through a half-open door. It was possible they would just be coming out of school, this being Saturday.

Her heart beat faster as the carriage drew up and the bell was rung.

"Is Mrs. Goodall at home?" she asked. "If so, might I speak to her a moment?"

"Yes, Miss. Will you come in, please?" Patricia followed the maid through rather a bare hall, to a small sitting-room on the left-hand side.

It was not an attractive sitting-room, for the chairs had a singularly stiff, uninviting appear-

ance, the grate rejoiced in coloured paper shavings, and three pots of artificial flowers ornamented the window.

From across the passage came the monotonous sound of scales, and a loud, imperious voice marking time.

"One! two! three! four!—One! two! three! four!" Oh, the regularity of those tones! They fidgeted Patricia, sorely. She found herself contrasting Clavier House with Thames Bank, and wondering if school were as attractive as she had been wont to consider it. Perhaps, after all, home life—though home had often been lonely—was the better of the two.

Presently the door opened and Mrs. Goodall came in. She was a tall, grey-haired woman, with a benevolent face and sausage curls by her ears, fastened with combs. She looked with some surprise at Patricia, who, free from all trace of shyness, came forward and held out a friendly hand.

"How do you do, Mrs. Goodall? I have come to ask you about something very important—Fraülein Parbs."

Patricia said this with such a funny little intonation of seriousness and mystery that the benevolent lady smiled.

"Sit down, my dear ; I am willing to listen," replied Mrs. Goodall.

"Well, it's like this," said Patricia. "Poor Fraülein is fussing dreadfully because she thinks you'll give away the situation to somebody else while she is in bed with a cold. Of course I know it's just that she is over-anxious, being ill. I was quite sure myself you would not do anything so unkind, after raising her hopes. But I came to ask you to say for certain, just to make it all right and comfortable for her. She will probably be up and out in a few days, now that she is being properly attended to, and I've brought her testimonials. She would be glad if you would look at them, please."

Patricia unfolded the packet, spreading the papers on Mrs. Goodall's lap.

The latter put up her glasses and read the contents in silence.

Patricia's eager eyes followed her every movement. The head mistress was conscious of the girl's bright face scanning her, only waiting for the word to make Fraülein happy.

Like many another, this elderly, grey-haired lady fell under the spell of Patricia's influence. The words: "I was quite sure myself you would not do anything so unkind," made a

very marked impression. They gave the schoolmistress an uncomfortable conviction that she might have been quite as unkind if Patricia had not felt so sure on the subject.

"How soon do you think she will be able to come?" asked Mrs. Goodall.

"I should say in a week—at a shot," said Patricia; "perhaps sooner."

"Well, then, we'll consider the matter settled. I thought Fraülein Parbs spoke with an exceedingly good accent; so different to our last governess, a Swiss. We were obliged to part with her on account of her genders. Our system here is excellent; young ladies get the very first education in England! You live near us, my dear?"

"A few miles off; I drove in to Minstone to-day."

"We receive daily pupils as well as boarders, and the playground at the back of the house is in very good condition. The girls are just going out. Perhaps you would like to look at the garden; we have a tennis-court and croquet ground."

"Oh, thank you," cried Patricia, delighted; "I should love it above all things! I expect your girls are awfully happy, and thank you so very much about Fraülein."

Patricia followed Mrs. Goodall to the steps leading to a high, walled-in ground called "the garden." There were no flowers, and the gravel paths sadly needed weeding; but Patricia thought nothing of that. She was only conscious of a crowd of girls, all glancing towards her curiously, and whispering among themselves. "So these are Fraülein's future pupils," she thought. "They will be jolly enough altogether—different to one alone. No, I don't pity them."

Patricia longed to join the little groups and ask them questions—there was so much she wanted to know about school life. But Mrs. Goodall did not give her the chance, so she could only look and wonder.

"I must go back to Fraülein now, and tell her the good news," said Patricia, as they turned into the house again.

"Perhaps you would like to take my card and show it to your mother?" said Mrs. Goodall, handing Patricia a piece of paste-board.

"Thank you, but I haven't got a mother," replied the girl softly.

Mrs. Goodall bent down quickly and unexpectedly to kiss Patricia.

"Goodbye, my dear," she said. "I shall

not forget my promise to keep Fraülein her vacancy. I hope she will be better soon."

When the joyous messenger returned to that little top room in the cheap lodging-house, she seemed to bring a whole flood of sunshine in with her presence. So bright, smiling, and victorious she appeared, that Fraülein knew instantly her cause was won.

"Mrs. Goodall was so nice. She has promised to wait for you. I liked her immensely, and I've seen the school-girls."

"It is really true—she engage no one else? She is not angry dat I fall ill?" queried Fraülein. "Ah, but vat good news, vat pleasure to 'ear such tidings! It 'as make my 'eart young again; it give me 'ope and spirit and courage! I feel so *vif* I could spring from my bed, but I still 'old dis poultice on my chest. The oil from the linseed do good after de hot depart."

"I'm awfully glad, too," said Patricia. "We will come again to-morrow afternoon and look after you. I really think Miss Wilson makes an excellent nurse and doctor. In the meanwhile, I am going to talk most seriously to your landlady, and tell her to take every care of you. I can see she is rather stupid and neglectful, for your room wants dusting badly."

There is dust on all your little ornaments. I'll give them a good rub over before I go with my handkerchief."

"Vas there ever so sweet or good a child as my dear, amiable Patricia?" said Fraülein, turning to Miss Wilson; "and you too, *chère dame*. My deep thanks to you for so much *bonté*. The good God 'as sent me wonderful kind friends in my hour of loneliness; it vas as light from heaven ven you come to minister to my chagrin!"

They wished Fraülein an affectionate *au revoir*—not goodbye.

"You forgive me for my misjudgment of your beautiful *caractère*?" said the sick woman, holding Patricia's hand.

"You mustn't make fun of me," laughed the girl. "There's nothing very beautiful, I'm afraid."

Then she withdrew her hand and was gone before Fraülein had time to contradict.

"I *am* pleased we managed to be of use to that poor old thing," Patricia said as they drove home. "We'll pull her round in no time, won't we, Miss Wilson?"

"Oh, yes; she has run down, and let her cough get the better of her—that's all! I feel very interested in the case of my predecessor.

I think I have prescribed the very thing to cure her."

That afternoon Mr. Iven came from town, and Patricia gave him the story in full. He seemed extremely pleased with Patricia when he heard what she had done, and gave her half a crown extra pocket money. He also said that if she wanted anything for Fraülein, she was to buy it, and put it down to him.

"Are you quite happy with Miss Wilson?" he asked.

Patricia smiled contentedly. "I'm just as happy as ever I can be!" she replied.

THE END.

The Gresham Press.

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